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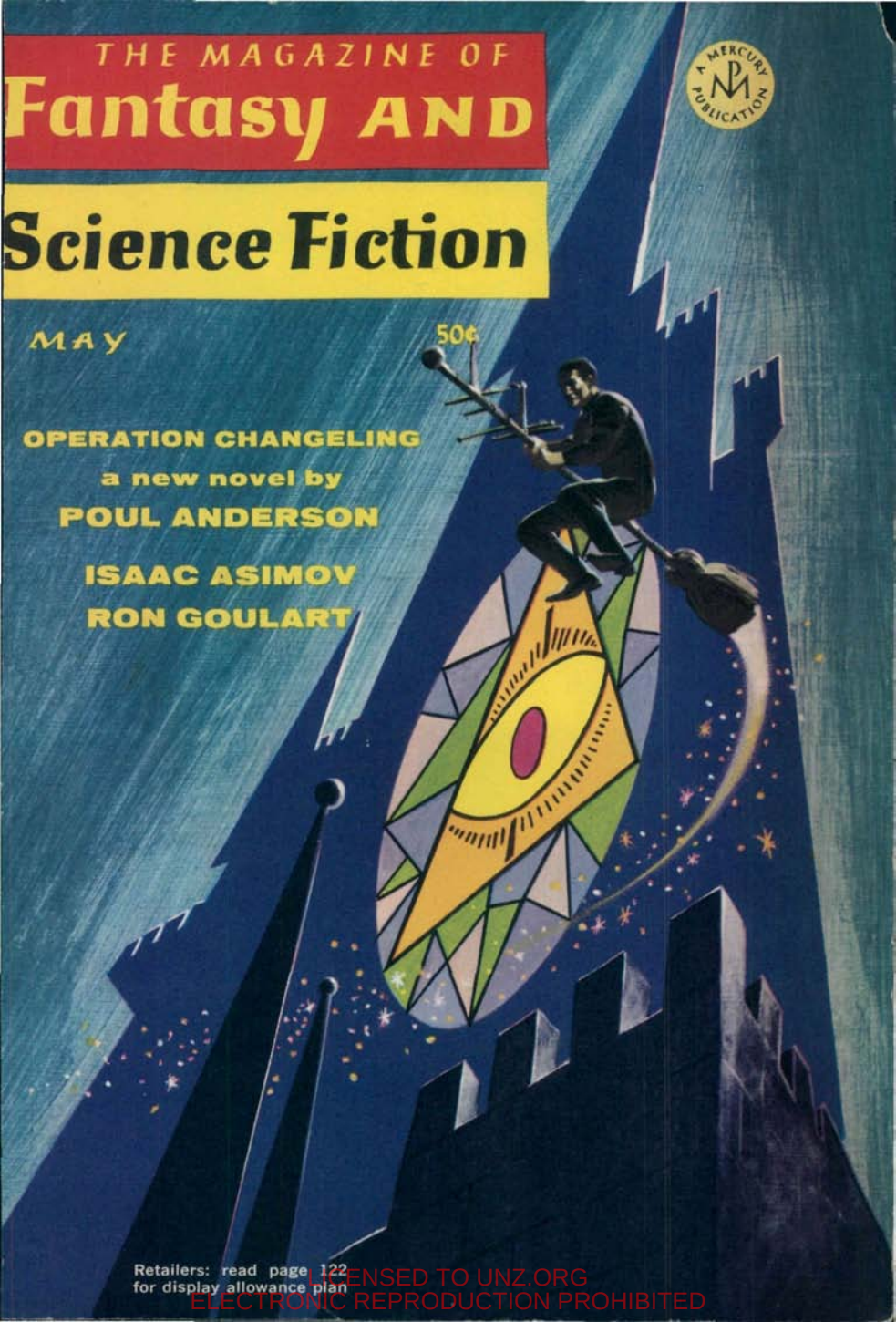
OPERATION CHANGELING
a new novel by
POUL ANDERSON

ISAAC ASIMOV

RON GOULART



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Fantasy and Science Fiction

MAY

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Poul Anderson's popular "operation" stories (OPERATION AFREET, *Sept. 1956;* OPERATION SALAMANDER, *Jan. 1957;* OPERATION INCUBUS, *Oct. 1959*) *are among the best examples of good science fantasy: stories that treat the rich world of fantasy and magic with the discipline and consistency of science fiction. The hero of this story is a werewolf; the heroine is a witch, but a witch with a Ph.D. in Arcana! They are two colorful and extraordinary trouble shooters, and in this—the first new operation story in ten years—they find themselves in deep trouble indeed.*

OPERATION CHANGELING

by Poul Anderson

(1st of 2 parts)

AND THEN A NURSE LED ME TO the bed where my darling now lay. Always fair-hued, she was white after her battle, and the beautiful bones stood out sharply in her face. But her hair was fire across the pillow, and though the lids drooped on her eyes, that green had never shone brighter.

I bent and kissed her, as gently as I could. "Hi, there," she whispered.

"How are you?" was the foolish single thing that came to me to say.

"Fine." She regarded me for a moment before, abruptly, she grinned. "But you look as if couvade might be a good idea."

As a matter of fact, some obstetricians do put the father to bed when a child is being born. Our doctor followed majority opinion in claiming that I'd give my wife the maximum possible sympathetic help by just sweating it out in the waiting room. I'd studied the subject frantically enough, these past months, to become somewhat of an authority. A first birth for a tall slim girl like Ginny was bound to be difficult. She took the prospect with her usual coolness, unbending only to

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the extent of casting runes to foretell the sex of the child, and that only so we wouldn't be caught flatfooted for a name.

"How do you like your daughter?" she asked me.

"Gorgeous," I said.

"Liar," she chuckled. "The man never lived who wasn't horrified when they told him he'd sired that wrinkled blob of red protoplasm." Her hand reached for mine. "But she will be lovely, Steve. She can't help being. It's so lovely between us."

I told myself that I would *not* bawl right in front of the mothers in this room. The nurse saved me with a crisp: "I think we had better let your wife rest, Mr. Matuchek. And Dr. Ashman would like to finish things so he can go home."

He was waiting for me in the naming office. When I had passed through the soundproof door, the nurse sealed it behind me with wax and a davidstar. This was an up-to-date hospital where they took every care. Thomas Ashman was a grizzled, craggy six-footer with a relaxed manner, at present a bit droopy from weariness. I saw that beneath the impressive zodiacal traceries on his surgical gown he'd been wearing white duck pants and a tee shirt—besides his amulet, of course.

We shook hands. "Everything's good," he assured me. "I've gotten the lab report. You understand that, with no therianthropes on the maternal side, none of your children will ever be a natural werewolf. But since this one has inherited the complete recessive gene complex from you, she'll be able to undergo transformation spells quite easily. A definite advantage, especially if she goes in for a thaumaturgic career like her mother. It does mean, however, that certain things should be guarded against. She'll be more subject to paranatural influences than most people are."

I nodded. Ginny and I had already had an undue share of adventures we didn't really want.

"Marry her off right," Ashman joked, "and you'll have werewolf grandchildren."

"If she takes after her old lady," I said, "Lord help any poor boy we tried to force on her!" I felt as idiotic as I sounded. "Doctor, we're both tired. Let's make out the birth certificates and turn in."

"Sure." He sat down at the desk. The parchments were already inscribed with parental names, place and date, and the file number they bore in common. "What're you calling her?"

"Valeria."

"Yes, I supposed your wife would pick something like that. Her idea, wasn't it? Any middle name?"

"Uh . . . Mary. My decision—for my own mother—" I realized I was babbling again.

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"Good thought. She can take refuge in it if she doesn't like the fancy monicker. Though I suspect she will." He typed out the information, signed, gave me the document and dropped the carbon in an out-box. Rather more ceremoniously, he laid down the primary certificate that bore her fingerprints. "And the true name?"

"Victrix."

"Hm?"

"Ginny always liked it. Valeria Victrix. The last Roman legion in Britain." The last that stood against Chaos, she had said in one of her rare wholly serious moments.

Ashman shrugged. "Well, it isn't as if the kid's going to use it."

"I hope she never has to!"

"That'd imply a bad emergency," he agreed. "But don't fret. I see too many young husbands, shaken up by what they've undergone, be knocked for a loop at the grim possibilities they have to face now. Really, though, this is nothing more than another sensible precaution, like a vaccination, only against criminal name spells."

"I know," I said. "Wish they'd had the idea when I was born." Medical science is one of the few areas where I'll admit that genuine progress gets made.

Ashman dipped an eagle quill in a well of oak-gall ink. "By the bird of thy homeland and the tree of the lightning," he intoned, "under their protection and God's, child of this day, be thy true name, known on this earth but to thy parents, thy physician, and thee when thou shalt come of age: Victrix; and may thou bear it in honor and happiness while thy years endure. Amen." He wrote, dusted sand from Galilee across the words, and stood up again. "This one I'll file personally," he said. Yawning: "Okay, that's all."

We repeated our handshake. "I'm sorry you had to deliver her at such an unsanctified hour," I said.

"We GP's get used to that," he answered. The sleepiness left him. He regarded me very steadily. "Besides, in this case I expected it."

"Huh?"

"I'd heard something about you and your wife already," Ashman said. "I looked up more. Cast a few runes of my own. Maybe you don't know it yourself, but that kid was begotten on the winter solstice. And, quite apart from her unusual heredity, there's something else about her. I can't identify it. But I felt pretty sure she'd be born this night—because a full moon was due on Matthewsmas. I'm going to watch her with a great deal of interest, Mr. Matuchek, and I suggest you take extra special care of her . . . Goodnight, now."

Nothing spectacular happened

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to us in the following three years. Or so you would have thought, but you are somebody else. For our little circle, it was when the world opened up for our taking and, at the same time, buckled beneath our feet.

To start with, Valeria was unexpected. We found out later that Svartalf, the cat, had been chasing the brownie again, and in revenge, the Good Folk had turned Ginny's pills to aspirin. Afterward I've wondered if more didn't lie behind the incident than that. The Powers have Their ways of steering us toward situations that will serve Their ends.

At first Ginny intended to go ahead according to our original plan, as soon as the youngster was far enough along that a babysitter could handle things by day. And she did take her Ph.D. in Arcana, and had some excellent job offers. But once our daughter was part of our home, well, mama's emancipation kept getting postponed. We weren't about to let any hireling do slobwork on Valeria! Not yet, when she was learning to smile, when she was crawling everywhere around, when her noises of brook and bird were changing into language—later, later.

I quite agreed. But this meant giving up, for a while if not forever, the condition we'd looked forward to—a smart young couple with a plump double income, doing glamorous things in glamorous places among glamorous people. I did propose trying to take up my Hollywood career again but would have been astounded if Ginny had been willing to hear word one of that idea. "Do you imagine for half a second," she said, "that I'd want a mediocre player of Silver Chief and Lassie, when I could have a first-class engineer?" Personally, I don't think the pictures I made were that all bad, but on the whole, her answer relieved me.

A newly created B.Sc. doesn't step right into the kind of challenging project he hopes for, especially when he's older than the average graduate. I had to start out with what I could get. By luck —we believed then—that was unexpectedly good.

The Nornwell Scryotronics Corporation was among the new outfits in the booming postwar communications and instrument business. Though small, it was upward bound on an exponential curve. Besides manufacturing, it did R and D, and I was invited to work on the latter. This was not simply fascinating in itself, it was a long step toward my ultimate professional goal. The pay wasn't bad, either. And soon Barney Sturlason was my friend as much as he was my boss.

The chief drawback was that we had to stay in this otherwise dull city and endure its ghastly Upper Midwestern winters. But

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we rented a comfortable suburban house, which helped. And we had each other, and little Valeria. Those were good years. It's just that nobody else would find an account of them especially thrilling.

That's twice true when you consider what went on meanwhile at large. I suppose mankind has always been going to perdition in a roller coaster and always will be. Still, certain eras remind you of the old Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times!"

Neither Ginny nor I had swallowed the propaganda guff about how peace and happiness would prevail forevermore once the wicked Caliphate had been defeated. We knew what a legacy of wretchedness all wars must leave. Besides, we knew this conflict was more a symptom than a cause of the world's illness. The enemy wouldn't have been able to overrun most of the eastern hemisphere and a chunk of the United States if Christendom hadn't been divided against itself. For that matter, the Caliphate was nothing but the secular arm of a Moslem heresy; we had plenty of good Allah allies.

It did seem reasonable, though, to expect that afterward people would have learned their lesson, put their religious quarrels aside and settled down to reconstruction. In particular, we looked for the Johannine Church to be generally discredited and fade away. True, its adherents had fought the Caliph too, had in fact taken a leading role in the resistance movements in the occupied countries. But wasn't its challenge to the older creeds—to the whole basis of Western society—what had split and weakened our civilization in the first place? Wasn't its example that had stimulated the rise of the lunatic Caliphist ideology in the Middle East?

I now know better than to expect reasonableness in human affairs.

Contrary to popular impression, the threat didn't appear suddenly. A few men warned against it from the beginning. They pointed out how the Johnnies had become dominant in the politics of more than one nation, which thereupon stopped being especially friendly to us, and how in spite of this they were making converts throughout America. But most of us hardly listened. We were too busy repairing war damage, public and personal. We considered those who sounded the alarm to be reactionaries and would-be tyrants—which some, perhaps, were. The Johannine theology might be nuts, we said, but didn't the First Amendment guarantee its right to be preached? The Petrine churches might be in trouble, but wasn't that their problem? And really, in our scientific day and age, to talk about subtle, pervasive dangers in

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a religious-philosophical system . . . a system which emphasized peacefulness almost as strongly as the Quakers, which exalted the commandment to love thy neighbor above every other—well, it just might be that our materialistic secular society and our ritualistic faiths would benefit from a touch of what the Johnnies advocated.

So the movement and its influence grew. And then the activist phase began: and somehow orderly demonstrations were oftener and oftener turning into riots, and wildcat strikes were becoming more and more common over issues that made less and less sense, and student agitation was paralyzing campus after campus, and person after otherwise intelligent person was talking about the need to tear down a hopelessly corrupt order of things so that the Paradise of Love could be built on the ruins . . . and the majority of us, that eternal majority which wants nothing except to be left alone to cultivate its individual gardens, wondered how the country could have started to disintegrate overnight.

Brother, it did not happen overnight. Not even over Walpurgis Night.

I came home early that June day. Our street was quiet, walled in between big old elms, lawns and houses basking in the sunlight. The few broomsticks in view were ridden by local women, carrying groceries in the saddlebags and an infant or two strapped in the kiddie seat. This was a district populated chiefly by young men on the way up. Such tend to have pretty wives, and in warm weather these tend to wear shorts and halters. The scenery lightened my mood no end.

I'd been full of anger when I left the turbulence around the plant. But here was peace. My roof was in sight. Ginny and Val were beneath it. Barney and I had a plan for dealing with our troubles, come this eventide. The prospect of action cheered me. Meanwhile, I was home!

I passed into the open garage, dismounted, and racked my Chevvy alongside Ginny's Volksbesen. As I came out again, aimed at the front door, a cannonball whizzed through the air and hit me. "Daddy! Daddy!"

I hugged my offspring close, curly yellow hair, enormous blue eyes, the whole works. She was wearing her cherub suit, and I had to be careful not to break the wings. Before, when she flew, it had been at the end of a tether secured to a post, and under Ginny's eye. What the deuce was she doing free—?

Oh—Svartalf zoomed around the corner of the house on a whiskbroom. His back was arched, this tail was raised, and he used bad

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language. Evidently Ginny had gotten him to supervise. He could control the chit fairly well, no doubt, keep her in the yard and out of trouble . . . until she saw Daddy arrive.

"Okay!" I laughed. "Enough. Let's go in and say boo to Mother."

"Wide piggyback?"

For Val's birthday last fall I'd gotten the stuff for an expensive spell and had Ginny change me. The kid was used to playing with me in my wolf form, I'd thought; but how about a piggyback ride, the pig being fat and white and spotted with flowers? The local small fry were still talking about it. "Sorry, no," I had to tell her. "After that performance of yours, you get the Air Force treatment." And I carried her by her ankles, squealing and wiggling, while I sang,

"Up in the air, junior birdman,
Up in the air, upside down—"

Ginny came into the living room, from the work room, as we did. Looking behind her, I saw why she'd deputized the supervision of Val's flytime. Washday. A three-year-old goes through a lot of clothes, and we couldn't afford self-cleaning fabrics. She had to animate each garment singly, and make sure they didn't tie themselves in knots or something while they soaped and rinsed and marched around to dry off and so forth. And, since a parade like that is irresistible to a child, she had to get Val elsewhere.

Nonetheless, I wondered if she wasn't being a tad reckless, putting her familiar in charge. Hitherto she'd done the laundry when Val was asleep. Svartalf had often shown himself to be reliable in the clutch. But for all the paranatural force in him, he remained a big black tomcat, which meant he was not especially dependable in dull everyday matters. . . . Then I thought, what the blazes, since Ginny stopped being a practicing witch, the poor beast hasn't had much excitement; he hasn't even got left a dog or another cat in the whole neighborhood that dares to fight him; this assignment was probably welcome; Ginny always knows what she's doing; and—

"—and I'm an idiot for just standing here gawping," I said, and gathered her in. She was dressed like the other wives I'd seen, but if she had been out there too, I wouldn't have seen them.

She responded. She knew how.

"What's a Nidiot?" Val asked from the floor. She pondered the matter. "Well, Daddy's a *good* Nidiot."

Svartalf switched his tail.

I relaxed my hold on Ginny a trifle. She ran her fingers through my hair. "Wow," she murmured. "What brought that on, tiger?"

"Daddy's a woof," Val corrected her.

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"You can call me tiger today," I said, feeling happier by the minute.

Ginny leered. "Okay, pussycat."

"Wait a bit—"

She shrugged. The red tresses moved along her shoulders. "Well, if you insist, okay, Lame Thief of the Waingunga."

Val regarded us sternly. "When you fwoo wif you' heads," she directed, "put 'em outside to melt."

The logic of this, and the business of getting the cherub rig off her, took time to unravel. Not until our offspring was bottoms up on the living room floor, watching cartoons on the crystal ball, and I was in the kitchen watching Ginny start supper, did we get a chance to talk.

"How come you're home so early?" she asked.

"How'd you like to reactivate the old outfit tonight?" I replied.

"Which?"

"Matuchek and Graylock—no, Matuchek and Matuchek—Troubleshooters Extraordinary, Licensed Confounders of the Ungodly."

She put down her work and gave me a long look. "What are you getting at, Steve?"

"You'll see it on the ball, come news time," I answered. "We aren't simply being picketed any more. They've moved onto the grounds. They're blocking every doorway. Our personnel had to leave by skylight, and rocks got thrown at some of them."

She was surprised and indignant, but kept the coolness she showed to the world outside this house. "You didn't call the police?"

"Sure, we did. I listened in, along with Barney, since Roberts thought a combat veteran might have some useful ideas. We can get police help if we want it. The demonstrators have turned into trespassers, and windows are broken, walls defaced with obscene slogans, that sort of thing. Our legal case is plenty clear. Only the opposition is out for trouble. Trouble for us, as much as possible, but mainly they're after martyrs. They'll resist any attempt to disperse them. Just like the fracas in New York last month. A lot of these characters are students, too. Imagine the headlines: Police Brutality Against Idealistic Youths. Peaceful Protesters Set On With Clubs And Geas Casters.

"Remember, this is a gut issue. Nornwell manufactures a lot of police and defense equipment, like witchmark fluorescers and basilisk goggles. We're under contract to develop more kinds. The police and the armed forces serve the Establishment. The Establishment is evil. Therefore, Nornwell must be shut down."

"*Quod erat demonstrandum* about," she sighed.

"The chief told us that an offi-

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cial move to break up the invasion would mean bloodshed, which might touch off riots at the university, along Merlin Avenue—Lord knows where it could lead. He asked us to stop work for the rest of the week, to see if this affair won't blow over. We'd probably have to, anyway. Quite a few of our men told their supervisors they're frankly scared to come back, the way things are."

The contained fury sparked in her eyes. "If you knuckle under," she said, "they'll proceed to the next on their list."

"You know it," I said. "We all do. But there is that martyrdom effect. There are those Johnny priests ready to deliver yet another sanctimonious sermon about innocent blood equaling the blood of the Lamb. There's a country full of well-intentioned, bewildered people who'll wonder if maybe the Petrine churches aren't really on the way out, when the society that grew from them has to use violence against members of the Church of Love. Besides darling, violence has never worked against civil disobedience."

"Come back and tell me that after the machine guns have talked," she said.

"Yeah, sure. But who'd want to preserve a government that resorts to massacre? I'd sooner turn Johnny myself. The upshot is, Nornwell can't ask the police to clear its property for it."

Ginny cocked her head at me. "You don't look too miserable about this."

I laughed. "No. Barney and I brooded over the problem for a while and hatched us quite an egg. I'm actually enjoying myself by now, sort of. Life's been too tame of late. Which is why I asked if you'd like to get in on the fun."

"Tonight?"

"Yes. The sooner the better. I'll give you the details after our young hopeful's gone to bed."

Ginny's own growing smile faded. "I'm not sure I can get a sitter on notice that short. This is final exam week at the high school."

"Well, if you can't, what about Svartalf?" I suggested. "You won't be needing a familiar, and he can do the elementary things, keep guard, dash next door and yowl a neighbor awake if she gets collywobbles—Normally she sleeps fine."

Ginny agreed. I could see the eagerness build up in her. Though she'd accepted a housewife's role for the time being, no race horse really belongs on a plowing team.

In this fashion did we prepare the way for hell to break loose, literally.

The night fell moonless, a slight haze dulling the stars. We left soon afterward, clad alike in black sweaters and slacks, head-

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lights off. Having maintained the witch-sight given us in the Army, we made a flight that was safe, if illegal, high over the city's constellated windows and lamps until our stick swung downward again toward the industrial section. It lay still darker and emptier than was usual at this hour.

But Nornwell's grounds shone forth, an uneasy auroral glow in the air. As we neared, the wind that slid past, stroking and whispering to me, bore odors—flesh and sweat, incense, and electric acridity of paranatural energies. The hair stood erect along my spine. I was content not to be in wolf shape and get the full impact of that last.

The paved area around the main building was packed close to solid with bodies. So was the garden that had made our workers' warm-weather lunches pleasant; nothing remained of it except mud and cigarette stubs. I estimated five hundred persons altogether, blocking any except aerial access. Their mass was not restless, but the movement of individuals created an endless rippling through it, and the talk and foot-shuffle gave those waves a voice.

Near the sheds, our lot was less crowded. Scattered people there were taking a break from the vigil to fix a snack or flake out in a sleeping bag. They kept a respectful distance from a portable altar at the far end, though from time to time, someone would kneel in its direction.

I whistled, long and low. "That's arrived since I left." Ginny's arms caught tighter around my waist.

A Johannine priest was holding service. Altitude or no, we couldn't mistake his white robe, high-pitched minor-key chanting, spread-eagle stance which he could maintain for hours, the tau crucifix that gleamed tall and gaunt behind the altar, the four talismans—Cup, Wand, Sword and Disc—upon it. Two acolytes swung censers, whence came the smoke that sweetened and, somehow, chilled the air.

"What's he up to?" I muttered. I'd never troubled to learn much about the new church. Or the old ones, for that matter. Not that Ginny and I were ignorant of modern scientific discoveries proving the reality of the Divine and things like absolute evil, atonement, and an afterlife. But it seemed to us that so little is known beyond these bare hints and that God can have so infinitely many partial manifestations to limited human understanding, that we might as well call ourselves Unitarians.

"I don't know," she answered. Her tone was bleak. "I studied what's public about their rites and doctrines, but that's just the top part of the iceberg, and it was

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years ago for me. Anyhow, you'd have to be a communicant—no, a lot more, an initiate, ultimately an adept, before you were told what a given procedure really means."

I stiffened. "Could he be hexing our side?"

Whetted by alarm, my vision swept past the uneasy sourceless illumination and across the wider scene. About a score of burly blue policemen were posted around the block. No doubt they were mighty sick of being jeered at. Also, probably most of them belonged to traditional churches. They wouldn't exactly mind arresting the agent of a creed which said that their own creeds were finished.

"No," I replied to myself, "he can't be, or the cops'd have him in the cooler this minute. Maybe he's anathematizing us. He could do that under freedom of religion, I suppose. But actually casting a spell, bringing goetic forces in to work harm—"

Ginny interrupted my thinking aloud. "The trouble is," she said, "when you deal with these Gnostics, you don't know where their prayers leave off and their spells begin. Let's get cracking before something happens. I don't like the feel of the time-stream tonight."

I nodded and steered for the principal building. The Johnny didn't fret me too much. Chances were he was just holding one of his esoteric masses to encourage the demonstrators. Didn't the claim go that his church was the church of universal benevolence? That it actually had no need of violence, being above the things of this earth? "The day of the Old Testament, of the Father, was the day of power and fear; the day of the New Testament, of the Son, has been the day of expiation; the day of the Johannine Gospel, of the Holy Spirit, will be the day of love and unveiled mysteries." No matter now.

The police were interdicting airborne traffic in the immediate vicinity except for whoever chose to leave it. That was a commonsense move. None but a minority of the mob were Johnnies. To a number of them, the idea of despising and renouncing a sinful material world suggested nothing more than that it was fashionable to wreck that world. The temptation to flit overhead and drop a few Molotov cocktails could get excessive.

Naturally, Ginny and I might have insisted on our right to come here, with an escort if need be. But that could provoke the explosion we wanted to avoid. Altogether, the best idea was to slip in, unnoticed by friend and foe alike. Our commando-type skills were somewhat rusty, though; the maneuver demanded our full attention.

We succeeded. Our stick ghosted through a skylight left open,

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into the garage. To help ventilate the rest of the place, this was actually a well from roof to ground floor. Normally our employees came and went by the doors. Tonight, however, those were barred on two sides—by the bodies of the opposition, and by protective force-fields of our own which it would take an expert wizard to break.

The Pinkerton technician hadn't conjured quite fast enough for us. Every first-story window was shattered. Through the holes drifted mumbled talk, background chant. Racking the broom, I murmured in Ginny's ear—her hair tickled my lips and was fragrant —"You know, I'm glad they did get a priest. During the day, they had folk singers."

"Poor darling." She squeezed my hand. "Watch out for busted glass." We picked our way in the murk to a hall and upstairs to the R and D section. It was defiantly lighted. But our footfalls rang too loud in its emptiness. It was a relief to enter Barney Sturlason's office.

His huge form rose behind the desk. "Virginia!" he rumbled. "What an unexpected pleasure." Hesitating: "But, uh, the hazard—"

"Shouldn't be noticeable, Steve tells me," she said. "And I gather you could use an extra thaumaturgist."

"Sure could." I saw how his homely features sagged with exhaustion. He'd insisted that I go home and rest. This was for the practical reason that, if things went sour and we found ourselves attacked, I'd have to turn wolf and be the main line of defense until the police could act. But he'd stayed on, helping his few volunteers make ready.

"Steve's explained our scheme?" he went on. His decision to accept her offer had been instantaneous. "Well, we need to make sure the most delicate and expensive equipment doesn't suffer. Quite apart from stuff being ruined, imagine the time and cost of recalibrating every instrument we've got, from dowsers to tarots! I think everything's adequately shielded, but I'd certainly appreciate an independent check by a fresh mind."

"Okay." She'd visited sufficiently often to be familiar with the layout. "I expect you two'll be busy for a while."

"Yes, I'm going to give them one last chance out there," Barney said, "and in case somebody gets overexcited, I'd better have Steve along for a bodyguard."

"And *I* still believe you might as well save your breath," I snorted.

"No doubt you're right, as far as you go," Barney said, "but don't forget the legal aspect. I don't own this place, I only head up a department. We're acting on our

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personal initiative after the directors agreed to suspend operations. Jack Roberts' approval of our plan was strictly *sub rosa*. Besides, ownership or not, we can no more use spells offensively against trespassers than we could use shotguns. The most we're allowed is harmless defensive forces to preserve life, limb, and property. I have to make it perfectly clear before plenty of witnesses that we intend to stay within the law."

I shed my outer garments. Underneath was the elastic knit one-piecer that would keep me from arrest for indecent exposure as a human, yet not hamper me as a wolf. The moonflash already hung around my neck like a thick round amulet. Ginny kissed me hard. "Take care of yourself, tiger," she whispered.

She had no strong cause to worry. The besiegers were unarmed, except for fists and feet and possibly some smuggled billies or the like—nothing I need fear after Skinturning. Even knives and bullets and fangs could inflict permanent harm only under rare and special conditions, like those which had cost me my tail during the war. Besides, the likelihood of a fight was small. Nonetheless, Ginny's tone was not completely level, and she watched us go down the hall till we had rounded a corner.

At that time, Barney said, "Wait a tick," opened a closet, and extracted a blanket that he hung on his arm. "If you should have to change shape," he said, "I'll throw this over you."

"Whatever for?" I exclaimed. "That's not sunlight, it's elflight. It won't inhibit transformation."

"It's changed character since that priest set up shop. I used a spectroscope to make certain. The glow's acquired enough ultraviolet—3500 angstroms to be exact—that you'd have trouble. By-product of a guardian spell against any that we might try to use offensively."

"But we *won't*!"

"Of course not. It's pure ostentation on his part. Clever, though. When they saw a shield-field established around them, the fanatics and naive children in the mob leaped to the conclusion that it was necessary; and thus Nornwell gets reconfirmed as the Enemy." He shook his head. "Believe me, Steve, these demonstrators are being operated like gloves, by some mighty shrewd characters."

"You sure the priest himself raised the field?"

"Yeah. They're all Magi in that clergy, remember—part of their training—and I wonder what else they learn in those lonesome seminaries. Let's try talking with him."

"Is he in charge?" I wondered. "The Johannine hierarchy does claim that when its members mix in politics, they do it strictly as private citizens."

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"I know," Barney said. "And I am the Emperor Norton."

"No, really," I persisted. "These conspiracy theories are too bloody simple to be true. What you've got is a, uh, a general movement, something in the air, people disaffected—"

But then, walking, we'd reached one of the ornamental glass panels that flanked the main entrance. It was smashed like the windows, but no one had thought to barricade it, and our protective spell forestalled entry. Of course, that did not affect us. We stepped through, onto the landing, right alongside the line of bodies that was supposed to keep us in.

We couldn't go further. The stairs down to the ground were packed solid. For a moment we weren't noticed. Barney tapped one scraggle-bearded adolescent on the shoulder. "Excuse me," he said from his towering height. "May I?" He plucked a sign out of the unwashed hand, hung the blanket over the placard and waved his improvised flag of truce aloft. The color was bilious green.

A kind of gasp, like the puff of wind before a storm, went through the crowd. I saw faces and faces and faces next to me, below me, dwindling off into the dusk beyond the flickering elf-light. I don't think it was only my haste and my prejudice that made them look eerily alike.

You hear a lot about long-haired men and short-haired women, bathless bodies and raggedy clothes. Those were certainly present in force. Likewise, I identified the usual graybeard radicals and campus hangers-on, hoodlums, unemployables, vandals, True Believers, and the rest. But there were plenty of clean, well-dressed, terribly earnest boys and girls. There were the merely curious, too, who had somehow suddenly found themselves involved. And everyone was tall, short, or medium, fat, thin, or average, rich, poor, or middle class, bright, dull, or normal, heterosexual, homosexual, or I know not what, able in some fields, inept in others, interested in some things, bored by others, each with an infinite set of memories, dreams, hopes, terrors, loves—each with a soul.

No, the sameness appeared first in the signs they carried. I didn't count how many displayed ST. JOHN, 13:34 or I JOHN, 2:9-11 or another of those passages; how many more carried the texts, or some variation like LOVE THY NEIGHBOR or plain LOVE; quite a few, anyway, repeating and repeating. Others were less amiable:

DEMATERIALIZE THE MATERIALISTS!

WEAPONMAKERS, WEEP!

STOP GIVING POLICE DEVILS HORNS!

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KILL THE KILLERS, HATE THE HATERS, DESTROY THE DESTROYERS!

SHUT DOWN THIS SHOP

And so it was as if the faces—worse, the brains behind them—had become nothing but placards with slogans written across.

The indrawn breath returned as a guttural sigh that edged toward a growl. The nearest males took a step or two in our direction. Barney waved his flag. "Wait!" he called, a thunderous basso overriding any other sound. "Truce! Let's talk this over! Take your leader to me!"

"Nothing *to* talk about, you murderers!" screamed a pimply girl. She swung her sign at me. I glimpsed upon it PEACE AND BROTHERHOOD before I had to get busy protecting my scalp. Someone began a chant that was quickly taken up by more and more: "Down with Diotrephes, down with Diotrephes, down with Diotrephes—"

Alarm stabbed through me. Those words had hypnotized other crowds into destructive frenzy.

I took her sign away from the girl, defended my eyes from her fingernails and reached for my flash. But abruptly everything changed. A bell sounded. A voice cried. Both were low, both somehow penetrated the rising racket.

"Peace. Hold love in your hearts, children. Be still in the presence of the Holy Spirit."

My attacker retreated. The others who hemmed us in withdrew. Individuals started falling on their knees. A moan went through the mob, growing almost orgasmic before it died away into silence. Looking up, I saw the priest approach.

He traveled bell in one hand, holding onto the upright of his tau crucifix while standing on its pedestal. Thus Christ nailed to the Cross of Mystery went before him. Nothing strange about that, I thought wildly, except that other churches would call it sacrilegious to give the central sign of their faith yonder shape, put an antigrav spell on it and use it like any broomstick. Yet the spectacle was weirdly impressive. It was like an embodiment of that Something Else on which Gnosticism is focused.

As the priest landed in front of us, though, he looked entirely human. He was short and skinny, his robe didn't fit too well, glasses perched precariously on his button nose, his graying hair was so thin I could hardly follow the course of his tonsure—the strip shaven from ear to ear, across the top of the head, that was said to have originated with Simon Magus.

He turned to the crowd first. "Let me speak with these gentlemen out of love, not hatred, and righteousness may prevail," he said in his oddly carrying tone.

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" 'He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.' "

"Amen," mumbled across the grounds.

As the little man faced back toward us, I had a sudden belief that he really meant that dear quotation. It didn't drive away the miasma. The Adversary knows well how to use single-minded sincerity. But I felt less hostile to this priest as a person.

He smiled at us and bobbed his head. "Good evening," he said. "I am Initiate Fifth Class Marmiadon, at your service."

"Your, uh, ecclesiastical name?" Barney asked.

"Why, of course. The old name is the first of the things of this world that must be left behind at the Gate of Passage. I'm not afraid of a hex, if that is what you mean, sir."

"No, I suppose not." Barney introduced us, a cheap token of amity since we were both easily identifiable. "We came out hoping to negotiate a settlement."

Marmiadon beamed. "Wonderful! Blessings! I'm not an official spokesman, you realize. The Committee for National Righteousness called for this demonstration. However, I'll be glad to use my good offices."

"The trouble is," Barney said, "we can't do much about their basic demands. We're not against world peace and universal disarmament ourselves, you understand; but those are matters for international diplomacy. In the same way, the President and Congress have to decide whether to end the occupation of formerly hostile countries and spend the money on social uplift at home. Amnesty for rioters is up to state or city governments. School courses in Gnostic philosophy and history have to be decided on by elected authorities. As for total income-equalization and the phasing-out of materialism, hypocrisy, injustice—" He shrugged. "That needs a constitutional amendment at least."

"You can, however, lend your not inconsiderable influence to forwarding those ends," Marmiadon said. "For example, you can contribute to the committee's public education fund. You can urge the election of the proper candidates and help finance their campaigns. You can allow proselytizers to circulate among your employees. You can stop doing business with merchants who remain obstinate." He spread his arms. "In the course of so doing, my children, you can rescue yourselves from eternal damnation!"

"Well, maybe; though Pastor Karlslund over at St. Olaf's Lutheran might give me a different opinion on that," Barney said. "In any case, it's too big a list to check off in one day."

"Granted, granted." Marmiadon quivered with eagerness. "We

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reach our ends a step at a time. The present dispute is over a single issue."

"The trouble is," Barney said, "you want us to cancel contracts we've signed and taken money for. You want us to break our word and let down those who trust us."

His joy dropped from Marmiadon. He drew himself to his full meager height, looked hard and straight at us, and stated: "These soldiers of the Holy Spirit demand that you stop making equipment for the armed forces, oppressors abroad, and for the police, oppressors at home. Nothing more is asked of you at this time, and nothing less. The question is not negotiable."

"I see. I didn't expect anything else," Barney said. "Now I'm going to warn you."

Those who heard whispered to the rest, a hissing from mouth to mouth. I saw tension mount anew.

"If you employ violence upon those who came simply to remonstrate," Marmiadon declared, "they will either have the law upon you, or see final proof that the law is a creature of the vested interests . . . which I tell you in turn are the creatures of Satan."

"Oh, no, no," Barney answered. "We're mild sorts, whether you believe it or not. But you are trespassing. We're about to run an experiment. You could be endangered. Please clear the grounds for your own safety."

Marmiadon grew rigid. "If you think you can get away with a deadly spell—"

"Nothing like. I'll tell you precisely what we have in mind. We're thinking about a new method of transporting liquid freight. Before going further, we have to run a safety check on it. If the system fails, unprotected persons could be hurt." Barney raised his volume, though we knew some of the police officers would have owl's ears tuned in. "I order you, I warn you, I beg you to stop trespassing and get off company property. You have half an hour."

We wheeled and were back inside before the noise broke loose. Curses, taunts, obscenities, and animal howls followed us down the halls until we reached the blessed isolation of the main alchem lab.

The dozen scientists, technicians, and blue-collar men whom Barney had picked out of volunteers to stay with him, were gathered there. They sat smoking, drinking coffee, talking in low voices. When we entered, a small cheer came from them. They'd watched the confrontation on a closed-loop ball. I sought out Ike Abrams, the warehouse foreman. "All in order?" I asked.

He made a swab-O sign. "By me, she's clear and on green. I can't wait."

I considered him for a second.

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"You really have it in for those characters, don't you?"

"In my position, wouldn't you?" He looked as if he were about to spit.

In your position, I thought, or in any of a lot of other positions such as my own rationalism, but especially in yours, Ike—yes. The Gnostics do more than pervert the Gospel According to St. John, perhaps the most beautiful and gentle if the most mystical book in Holy Writ. They pluck out of context passages like "For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist." You see reviving around you the ancient nightmare of anti-Semitism.

A little embarrassed, I turned to Bill Hardy, our chief paracelsus, who sat swinging his legs from a lab bench. "How much stuff did you produce?" I asked.

"About fifty gallons," he said, pointing.

"Wow! With no alchemy?"

"Absolutely not. Pure, honest-to-Berzelius molecular interaction. I admit we were lucky to have a large supply of the basic ingredients on hand."

I winced, recalling the awful sample he'd whipped up when our scheme was first discussed. "How on Midgard did that happen?"

"Well, the production department is—was—filling some big orders," he said. "For instance, a dairy chain wanted a lot of rancidity preventers. You know the process, inhibit the reaction you don't want in a test tube, and cast a sympathetic spell to get the same effect in ton-lots of your product. Then the government is trying to control the skunk population in the western states, and —" He broke off as Ginny came in.

Her eyes glistened. She held her wand like a Valkyrie's sword. "We're set, boys." The words clanged.

"Let's go." Barney heaved his bulk erect. We followed him to the containers. They were ordinary flat one-gallon cans such as you buy paint thinner in, but Solomon's Seal marked the wax that closed each screw top, and I could subliminally feel the paranatural forces straining around them. It seemed out of keeping for the scientists to load them on a cart and trundle them off.

Ike and his gang went with me to my section. The apparatus I'd thrown together didn't look especially impressive either. In fact, it was a haywire monstrosity, coils and wires enclosing a big gasoline-driven electric generator. Sometimes you need more juice for an experiment than the carefully screened public power lines can deliver.

To cobble that stuff on, I'd had to remove the generator's own magnetic screens. What we had, therefore, was a mass of free cold

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iron; no spell would work in its immediate vicinity. Ike had been in his element this afternoon, mounting the huge weight and awkward bulk on wheels for me. He was again, now, as he directed it along the halls and skidded it over the stairs.

No doubt he sometimes wished people had never found how to degauss the influences that had held paranatural forces in check since the Bronze Age ended. He wasn't Orthodox; his faith didn't prohibit him having anything whatsoever to do with goetics. But neither was he Reform or Neo-Chasidic. He was a Conservative Jew, who could make use of objects that others had put under obedience but who mustn't originate any cantrips himself. It's a tribute to him that he was nonetheless a successful and popular foreman.

He'd rigged a husky block-and-tackle arrangement in the garage. The others had already flitted to the flat roof. Ginny had launched the canisters from there. They bobbed about in the air, out of range of the magnetic distortions caused by the generator when we hoisted its iron to their level. Barney swung the machine around until we could ease it down beside the skylight. That made it impossible for us to rise on brooms or a word. We joined our friends via rope ladder.

"Ready?" Barney asked. In the restless pale glow, I saw sweat gleam on his face. If this failed, he'd be responsible for unforeseeable consequences.

I checked the connections. "Yeah, nothing's come loose. But let me first have a look around."

I joined Ginny at the low parapet. Beneath us roiled the mob, faces and placards turned upward to hate us. They had spied the floating containers and knew a climax was at hand. Behind his altar, Initiate Marmiadon worked at what I took to be reinforcement of his defensive field. Unknown phrases drifted to me: "—*Heliphomar Mabon Saruth Gefutha Enunnas Sacinos*—" above the sullen mumble of our besiegers. The elflight flickered brighter. The air seethed and crackled with energies. I caught a thunderstorm whiff of ozone.

My darling wore a slight, wistful smile. "How Svartalf would love this," she said.

Barney lumbered to our side. "I'll give them one last chance," he said, and shouted the same same warning as before. Yells drowned him out. Rocks and offal flew against our walls. "Okay," he growled, "Let 'er rip!"

I went back to the generator and started the motor, leaving the circuits open. It stuttered and shivered. The vile fumes made me glad we'd escaped depending on internal combustion engines. I've seen automobiles, as they were

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called, built around 1950, shortly before the first broomstick flights. Believe me, museums are where they belong—a chamber of horrors, to be exact.

Ginny's clear call snapped my attention back. She'd directed the canisters into position. I could no longer see them, for they floated ten feet over the heads of the crowd, evenly spaced. She made a chopping gesture with her wand. I threw the main switch.

No, we didn't use spells to clear Nornwell's property. We used the absence of spells. The surge of current through the coils on the generator threw out enough magnetism to cancel every charm, ours and theirs alike, within a hundred-yard radius.

We'd stowed whatever gear might be damanged in safe conductive-shell rooms. We'd repeatedly cautioned the mob that we were about to experiment with the transportation of possibly dangerous liquids. No law required us to add that these liquids were in super-pressurized cans which were bound to explode and spray their contents the moment that the wall-strengthening force was annulled.

We'd actually exaggerated the hazard . . . in an attempt to avoid any slightest harm to trespassers. Nothing vicious was in those containers. Whatever might be slightly toxic was present in concentrations too small to matter, although a normal sense of smell would give ample warning regardless. Just a harmless mixture of materials like buytl mercaptan, butyric acid, methanethiol, skatole, cadaverine, putrescine . . . well, yes, the organic binder did have penetrative properties; if you got a few drops on your skin, the odor wouldn't disappear for a week or two. . . .

The screams reached me first. I had a moment to gloat. Then the stench arrived. I'd forgotten to don my gas mask, and even when I'm human, my nose is quite sensitive. The slight whiff I got sent me gasping and retching backward across the roof. It was skunk, it was spoiled butter, it was used asparagus, it was corruption and doom and the wheels of Juggernaut lubricated with Limburger cheese, it was beyond imagining. I barely got my protection on in time.

"Poor dear. Poor Steve." Ginny held me close.

"Are they gone?" I sputtered.

"Yes. Along with the policemen and, if we don't get busy, half this postal district."

I relaxed. We need hardly expect a return visit, I thought in rising glee. If you suffer arrest or a broken head for the Cause, you're a hero who inspires others. But if you merely acquire for a while a condition your best friends won't tell you about because they can't come within earshot of you—hasn't the Cause taken a setback?

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I grabbed Ginny to me and started to kiss her. Damn, I'd forgotten my gas mask again! She disentangled our snouts. "I'd better help Barney and the rest hex away those molecules before they spread," she told me. "Switch off your machine and screen it."

"Uh, yes," I must agree. "We want our staff returning to work in the morning."

What with one thing and another, we were busy for a couple of hours. After we finished, Barney produced some bottles, and the celebration lasted till well-nigh dawn. The eastern sky blushed pink when Ginny and I wobbled aboard our broom and hiccoughed, "Home, James."

The air blew cool, heaven reached high. "Know something?" I said over my shoulder. "I love you."

"Purr-rr-rr." She leaned forward to rub her cheek against mine. Her hands wandered.

"Shameless hussy," I said.

"You prefer some other kind?" she asked.

"Well, no," I said, "but you might wait a while. Here I am in front of you, feeling more lecherous every minute but without any way to lech."

"Oh, there are ways," she murmured dreamily. "On a broomstick yet. Have you forgotten?"

"No. But dammit, the local airlanes are going to be crowded with commuter traffic pretty soon, and I'd rather not fly several miles looking for solitude when we've got a perfectly good bedroom nearby."

"Right. I like that thought. Pour on the coal, James."

The stick accelerated.

I was full of glory and the glory that was her. She caught the paranatural traces first. My indication was that her head lifted from between my shoulder blades, her arms loosened around my waist while the fingernails bit through my shirt. "What the Moloch?" I exclaimed.

"Hsh!" she breathed. We flew in silence through the thin chill dawn wind. The city spread darkling beneath us. Her voice came at last, tense, but somehow dwindled and lost: "I said I didn't like the feel of the time-stream. In the excitement, I forgot."

My guts crawled, as if I were about to turn wolf. Senses and extrasenses strained forth. I've scant thaumaturgic skill—the standard cantrips, plus a few from the Army and more from engineering training—but a lycanthrope has inborn instincts and awarenesses. Presently I also knew.

Dreadfulness was about.

As we flitted downward, we knew that it was in our house.

We left the broomstick on the front lawn. I turned my key in the door and hurled myself through. "Val!" I yelled into the dim rooms. "Svartalf!"

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Chairs lay tumbled, vases smashed where they had fallen off shaken tables, blood was spattered over walls, floors, carpets, from end to end of the building.

We stormed into Valeria's room. When we saw that little shape quietly asleep in her crib, we held each other and wept.

Finally Ginny could ask, "Where's Svartalf? What happened?"

"I'll look around," I said. "He gave an epic account of himself, at least."

"Yes—" She wiped her eyes. As she looked around the wreckage in the nursery, that green gaze hardened. She stared down into the crib. "Why didn't you wake up?" she said in a tone I'd never heard before.

I was already on my way to search. I found Svartalf in the kitchen. His blood had about covered the linoleum. In spite of broken bones, tattered hide, belly gashed open, the breath rattled faintly in and out of him. Before I could examine the damage further, a shriek brought me galloping back to Ginny.

She held the child. Blue eyes gazed dully at me from under tangled gold curls. Ginny's face, above, was drawn so tight it seemed the skin must rip on the cheekbones. "Something's wrong with her," she told me. "I can't tell what, but something's wrong."

I stood for an instant feeling my universe break apart. Then I went into the closet. Dusk was giving place to day, and I needed darkness. I shucked my outer clothes and used my flash. Emerging, I went to those two female figures. My wolf nose drank their odors.

I sat on my haunches and howled.

Ginny laid down what she was holding. She stayed completely motionless by the crib while I changed back.

"I'll call the police," I heard my voice say to her. "That thing isn't Val. It isn't even human."

I take care not to remember the next several hours in detail.

At noon we were in my study. Our local chief had seen almost at once that the matter was beyond him and urged us to call in the FBI. Their technicians were still busy checking the house and grounds, inch by inch. Our best service was to stay out of their way. I sat on the day bed, Ginny on the edge of my swivel chair. From time to time one of us jumped up, paced around, made an inane remark, and slumped back down. The air was fogged with smoke from ashtray-overflowing cigarettes. My skull felt scooped out. Her eyes had retreated far back into her head. Sunlight, grass, trees were unreal in the windows.

"You really ought to eat," I said

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for the -?-th time. "Keep your strength."

"Same to you," she answered, not looking at me or at anything I could tell.

"I'm not hungry."

"Nor I."

We returned to the horror.

The extension phone yanked us erect. "A call from Dr. Ashman," it said. "Do you wish to answer?"

"For God's sake yes!" ripped from me. "Visual." The sympathetic connection was made.

Ashman's face looked well-nigh as exhausted as Ginny's. "We have the report," he said.

I tried to respond and couldn't.

"You were right," he went on. "It's a homunculus."

"What took you so long?" Ginny asked. Her voice wasn't husky any more, just hoarse and harsh.

"Unprecedented case," Ashman said. "Fairy changelings have always been considered a legend. Nothing in our data suggests any motive for nonhuman intelligences to steal a child . . . nor any method by which they could if they wanted to, assuming the parents take normal care . . . and certainly no reason for such hypothetical kidnapers to leave a sort of golem in its place." He sighed. "Apparently we know less than we believed."

"What are your findings?" The restored determination in Ginny's words brought my gaze to her.

"The police chirurgeon, the crime lab staff, and later a pathologist from the university hospital worked with me," Ashman told us. "Or I with them. I was merely the family doctor. We lost hours on the assumption Valeria was bewitched. The simulacrum is excellent, understand. It's mindless—the EEG is practically flat—but it resembles your daughter down to fingerprints. Not till she . . . it . . . had failed to respond to every therapeutic spell we commanded between us, did we think the body might be an imitation. You told us so at the outset, Steve, but we discounted that as hysteria. I'm sorry. Proof required a whole battery of tests. For instance, the saline content and PBI suggest the makers of the homunculus had no access to oceans. We clinched the matter when we injected some radio-activated holy water; that metabolism is not remotely human."

His dry tone was valuable. The horror began to have some shadowy outline; my brain creaked into motion, searching for ways to grapple it. "What'll they do with the changeling?" I asked.

"I suppose the authorities will keep it in the hope of—of learning something, doing something through it," Ashman said. "In the end, if nothing else happens, it'll doubtless be institutionalized. Don't hate the poor thing. That's all it is, manufactured for some evil reason, but not to blame."

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"Not to waste time on, you mean," Ginny rasped. "Doctor, have you any ideas about rescuing Val?"

"No. It hurts me." He looked it. "I'm only a medicine man, though. What further can I do? Tell me and I'll come flying."

"You can start right away," Ginny said. "You've heard, haven't you, my familiar was critically wounded defending her? He's at the vet's, but I want you to take over."

Ashman was startled. "What?"

"Look, Svartalf will get well. But vets don't have the expensive training and equipment used on people. I want him rammed back to health overnight. What runes and potions you don't have, you'll know how to obtain. Money's no object."

"Wait," I started to say, recalling what leechcraft costs are like.

She cut me off short. "Nornwell will foot the bill, unless a government agency does. They'd better. This isn't like anything else they've encountered. Could be a major emergency shaping up." She stood straight. Despite the sooted eyes, hair hanging lank, unchanged black garb of last night, she was once more Captain Graylock of the 14th United States Cavalry. "I am not being silly, Doctor. Consider the implications of your discoveries. Svartalf may or may not be able to convey a little information to me about what he encountered. He certainly can't when he's unconscious. At the least, he's always been a good helper, and we need whatever help we can get."

Ashman reflected a minute. "All right," he said.

He was about to sign off when the study door opened. "Hold it," a voice ordered. I turned on my heel, jerkily, uselessly fast.

The hard brown face and hard, rangy frame of Robert Shining Knife confronted me. The head of the local FBI office had discarded the conservative business suit of his organization for working clothes. His feather bonnet seemed to brush the ceiling; a gourd stuck into his breechclout rattled dryly to his steps; the blanket around his shoulders and the paint on his skin were patterned in thunderbirds, sun discs, and I know not what else.

"You listened in," I accused.

He nodded. "Couldn't take chances, Mr. Matuchek. Dr. Ashman, you'll observe absolute secrecy. No running off to any blabbermouth shaman or goodwife you think should be brought in consultation."

Ginny blazed up. "See here—"

"Your cat'll be repaired for you," Shining Knife promised in the same blunt tone. "I doubt he'll prove of assistance, but we can't pass by the smallest possibility. Uncle Sam will pick up the tab, and Dr. Ashman may as well head

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the team. But I want to clear the other members of it, and make damn sure they aren't told more than necessary. Wait in your office, Doctor. An operative will join you inside an hour."

The physician bristled. "And how long will he then take to certify that each specialist I may propose is an All-American Boy?"

"Very little time. You'll be surprised how much he'll know about them already. You'd also be surprised how much trouble someone would have who stood on his rights to tell the press or even his friends what's been going on." Shining Knife smiled sardonically. "I'm certain that's a superfluous warning, sir. You're a man of patriotism and discretion. Goodbye."

The phone understood him and broke the spell.

"Mind if I close the windows?" Shining Knife asked as he did so. "Eavesdroppers have sophisticated gadgets these days." He had left the door ajar; we heard his men moving around in the house, caught faint pungencies and mutterings. "Please sit down." He leaned back against a bookshelf and watched us.

Ginny controlled herself with an effort I could feel. "Aren't you acting rather high-handed?"

"The circumstances require it, Mrs. Matuchek," he said.

She bit her lip and nodded.

"What's this about?" I begged.

The hardness departed from Shining Knife. "We're confirming what your wife evidently suspects," he said with a compassion that made me wonder if he had a daughter of his own. "She's a witch and would know, but wouldn't care to admit it till every hope of a less terrible answer was gone. This is no ordinary kidnaping."

"Well, of course—!"

"Wait. I doubt if it's technically any kind of kidnaping. My bureau may have no jurisdiction. However, as your wife said, the case may well involve national security. I'll have to communicate with Washington and let them decide. In the last analysis, the President will. Meanwhile, we don't dare rock the boat."

I looked from him to Ginny to the horror that was again without form, not a thing to be fought but a condition of nightmare. "Please," I whispered.

Shining Knife spoke flatly and fast:

"We've ascertained that the blood is entirely the cat's. There are some faint indications of ichor, chemical stains which may have been caused by it, but none of the stuff itself. We got better clues from scratches and gouges in floor and furnishings. Those marks weren't left by anything we can identify, natural or paranatural; and believe me, our gang is good at identifications.

"The biggest fact is that the

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house was never entered. Not in any way we can check for—and, again, we know a lot of different ones. Nothing was broken, forced, or picked. Nothing had affected the guardian signs and objects; their fields were at full strength, properly meshed and aligned, completely undisturbed. Therefore nothing flew down the chimney, or oozed through a crack, or dematerialized past the walls, or compelled the babysitter to let it in.

"The fact that no one in the neighborhood was alerted is equally significant. Remember how common hex alarms and second-sighted watchdogs are. Something paranatural and hostile in the street would've touched off a racket to wake everybody for three blocks around. Instead, we've only got the Delacortes next door, who heard what they thought was a catfight."

He paused. "Sure," he finished, "we don't know everything about goetics. But we do know enough about its felonious uses to be sure this was no forced entry."

"What, then?" I cried.

Ginny said it for him: "It came in from the hell universe."

"Theoretically, could have been an entity from Heaven." Shining Knife's grin was brief and stiff. "But that's psychologically—spiritually—impossible. The M.O. is diabolic."

Ginny sat forward. Her features were emptied of expression, her chin rested on a fist, her eyes were half shut, the other hand drooped loosely over a knee. She murmured as if in a dream:

"The changeling fits your theory quite well, doesn't it? To the best of our knowledge, matter can't be transferred from one space-time plenum to another in violation of the conservation laws of physics. Psychic influences can go, yes. Visions, temptations, inspirations, that sort of thing. The uncertainty principle allows them. But not an actual object. If you want to take it from its proper universe to your own, you have to replace it with an identical amount of matter, whose configuration has to be fairly similar to preserve momentum. You may remember Villegas suggested this was the reason angels take more or less anthropomorphic shapes on earth."

Shining Knife looked uneasy. "This is no time to be unfriends with the Most High," he muttered.

"I've got no such intention," Ginny said in her sleepwalker's tone. "He can do all things. But His servants are finite. They must often find it easier to let transferred matter fall into the shape it naturally wants to, rather than solve a problem involving the velocities of ten to the umpteenth atoms in order to give it another form. And the inhabitants of the Low Con-

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tinuum probably can't. They aren't creative. Or so the Petrine churches claim. I understand the Johannine doctrine includes Manichean elements.

"A demon could go from his continuum to a point in ours that was inside this house. Because his own natural form is chaotic, he wouldn't have to counter-transfer anything but dirt, dust, trash, rubbish, stuff in a high-entropy condition. After he finished his task, he'd presumably return that material in the course of returning himself. It'd presumably show effects. I know things got generally upset in the fight, Mr. Shining Knife, but you might run a lab check on what was in the garbage can, the catbox, and so forth."

The FBI man bowed. "We thought of that, and noticed its homogenized condition," he said. "If *you* could think of it, under these circumstances—"

Her eyes opened fully. Her speech became like slowly drawn steel: "Our daughter is in hell, sir. We mean to get her back."

I thought of Valeria, alone amidst cruelty and clamor and unnameable distortions, screaming for a Daddy and a Mother who did not come. I sat there on the day bed, in the night which has no ending, and heard my lady speak as if she were across a light-years-wide abyss:

"Let's not waste time on emotions. I'll continue outlining the event as I reconstruct it; check me out. The demon—could have been more than one, but I'll assume a singleton—entered our cosmos as a scattered mass of material but pulled it together at once. By simple transformation, he assumed the shape he wanted. The fact that neither the Adversary nor any of his minions can create—if the Petrine tradition is correct—wouldn't handicap him. He could borrow an existing shape. The fact that you can't identify it means nothing. It could be a creature of some obscure human mythology, or some imaginative drawing somewhere, or even another planet.

"This is not a devout household. It'd be hypocrisy, and therefore useless, for us to keep religious symbols around that we don't love. Besides, in spite of previous experience with a demon or two, we didn't expect one to invade a middle-class suburban home. No authenticated case of that was on record. So the final possible barrier to his appearance was absent.

"He had only a few pounds of mass available to him. Any human who kept his or her head could have coped with him—if nothing else, kept him on the run, too busy to do his dirty work, while phoning for an exorcist. But on this one night, no human was here. Svartalf can't talk, and he obviously never got the chance to call in

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help by different means. He may have outweighed the demon, but not by enough to prevail against a thing all teeth, claws, spines, and armor plate. In the end, when Svartalf lay beaten, the demon took our Val to the Low Continuum. The counter-transferred mass was necessarily in her form.

"Am I right?"

Shining Knife nodded. "I expect you are."

"What do you plan to do about it?"

"Frankly, at the moment there's little or nothing we can do. We haven't so much as a clue to motive."

"You've been told about last night. We made bad enemies. I'd say the Johnny cathedral is the place to start investigating."

Behind his mask of paint, Shining Knife registered unhappiness. "I explained to you before, Mrs. Matuchek, when we first inquired who might be responsible, that's an extremely serious charge to make on no genuine evidence. The public situation is delicately balanced. Who realizes that better than you? We can't afford fresh riots. Besides, more to the point, this invasion could be the start of something far bigger, far worse than a kidnaping."

I stirred. "Nothing's worse," I mumbled.

He ignored me, sensing that at present Ginny was more formidable.

"We know practically zero about the hell universe. I'll stretch a point of security, because I suspect you've figured the truth out already on the basis of unclassified information; quite a few civilian wizards have. The Army's made several attempts to probe it, with no better success than the Faustus Institute had thirty years ago. Men returned in states of acute psychic shock, after mere minutes there, unable to describe what'd happened. Instruments recorded data that didn't make sense."

"Unless you adopt Nickelsohn's hypothesis," she said.

"What's it?"

"That space-time in that cosmos is non-Euclidean, violently so compared to ours, and the geometry changes from place to place."

"Well, yes, I'm told the Army researchers did decide—" He saw the triumph in her eyes. "Damn! What a neat trap you set for me!" With renewed starkness: "Okay. You'll understand we dare not go blundering around when forces we can't calculate are involved for reasons we can scarcely guess. The consequences could be disastrous. I'm going to report straight to the Director, who I'm sure will report straight to the President, who I'm equally sure will have us keep alert but sit tight till we've learned more."

"What about Steve and me?"

"You too. You might get contacted, remember."

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"I doubt it. What ransom could a demon want?"

"The demon's master—"

"I told you to check on the Johnnies."

"We will. We'll check on everything in sight, reasonable or not. But it'll take time."

"Meanwhile Valeria is in hell. We want a chance to go after our daughter."

My heart sprang. The numbness tingled out of me. I rose.

Shining Knife braced himself. "I can't permit that. Sure, you've both accomplished remarkable things in the past, but the stakes are too high now for amateurs to play. Hate me all you want. If it's any consolation, that'll pain me. But I can't let you jeopardize yourselves and the public interest. You'll stay put. Under guard."

"You—" I nearly jumped him. Ginny drew me back.

"Hold on, Steve," she said. "Don't make trouble. What we'll do, you and I, is choke down some food and a sleeping potion and cork off till we're fit again."

Shining Knife smiled. "Thanks," he said. "I was certain you'd be sensible. I'll go hurry 'em along in the kitchen so you can get that meal soon."

I closed the door behind him. Rage shivered me. "What the blue deuce is this farce?" I stormed. "If he thinks we'll sit and wait on a gaggle of bureaucrats—"

"Whoa!" She pulled my ear down to her lips. "What he thinks," she whispered, "is that his wretched guard will make any particular difference to us."

"Oh-ho!" For the first time I laughed. It wasn't merry or musical, but it was a laugh of sorts.

We weren't exactly under house arrest. The well-behaved young man who stayed with us was to give us what protection and assistance we might need. He made it clear, though, that if we tried to leave home or pass word outside, he'd suddenly and regretfully discover reason to hold us for investigation of conspiracy to overthrow the Interstate Commerce Commission.

He was a good warlock, too. An FBI agent must have a degree in either sorcery or accounting; and his boss wanted to be sure we didn't try anything desperate. But at supper Ginny magicked out of him the information she required. How she did that, I'll never understand. I don't mean she cast a spell in the technical sense. Rather, the charm she employed is the kind against which the only male protection is defective glands. What still seems impossible to me is that she could sit talking, smiling, flashing sparks of wit across a surface of controlled feminine sorrow, and leading him on to relate his past exploits . . . when each corner of the place screamed that Valeria was gone.

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We retired early, pleading exhaustion. Actually we were well rested and wire-taut. "He's sharp on thaumaturgy," my sweetheart murmured in the darkness of our bedroom, "but out of practice on mantics. A smoothly wrought Seeming ought to sucker him. Use the cape."

I saw her intent. A cold joy, after these past hours in chains, beat through me. I scrambled out of my regular clothes, into my wolf suit, and put the civies back on top. As I reached for the tarnkappe—unused for years, little more than a war souvenir—she came to me and pressed herself close. "Darling, be careful!" Her voice was not steady and I tasted salt on her lips.

She had to stay, allaying possible suspicions, ready to take the ransom demand that *might* come. Hers was the hard part.

I donned the cloak. The hood smelled musty across my face, and small patches of visibility showed where moths had gotten at the fabric. But what the nuts, it was merely to escape and later (we hoped) return here in. There are too many counter-agents these days for tarnkappen to be effective for serious work, ranging from infrared detectors to spray cans of paint triggered by an unwary foot. Our friendly Fed no doubt had instruments ready to buzz him if an invisibilizing field moved in his vicinity.

Ginny went into her passes, *sotto voce* incantations, and the rest. She'd brought what was necessary into this room during the day. Her excuse was that she wanted to give us both as strong a protection against hostile influences as she was able. She'd done it, too, with the FBI man's admiring approval. In particular, while the spell lasted, I'd be nearly impossible to locate by paranatural means alone.

The next stage of her scheme was equally straightforward. While terrestrial magnetism is too weak to cancel paranatural forces, it does of course affect them, and so do its fluctuations. Therefore ordinary goetic sensor devices aren't designed to register minor quantitative changes. Ginny would establish a Seeming. The feeble tarnkappe field would appear gradually to double in intensity, then, as I departed, oscillate back to its former value. On my return, she'd phase out the deception.

Simple in theory. In practice it took greater skill to pull off without triggering an alarm than her record showed she could possess. What the poor old FBI didn't know was that she had what went beyond training and equipment; she had a Gift.

At her signal, I slipped through the window. The night air was chill and moist; dew glistened on the lawn in the goblin glow of street lamps; I heard a dog howl.

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It had probably caught a whiff of my cloak. And no doubt the grounds were under surveillance . . . yes, my witch-sight picked out a man in the shadows beneath the elms across the way. . . . I padded fast and softly down the middle of the pavement, where I'd be least likely to affect some watchbeast or sentry field. When it comes to that sort of business, I'm pretty good myself.

After several blocks, safely distant, I reached the local grade school and stowed my tarnkappe in a playground trash can. Thereafter I walked openly, an unremarkable citizen on his lawful occasions. At the first phone booth I called Barney Sturlason's home. He said to come right on over. Rather than a taxi, I took a cross-town carpet, reasoning I'd be more anonymous as one of a crowd of passengers. I was.

Barney opened the door. Hallway light that got past his shoulders spilled yellow across me. He let out a soft whistle. "I figured you'd be too bushed to work today, Steve, but not that you'd look like Monday after Ragnarok. What's wrong?"

"Your family mustn't hear," I said.

He turned immediately and led me to his library. Waving me to one of the leather armchairs, he re-locked the door, poured two hefty Scotches and settled down opposite me. "Okay," he invited.

I told him. Never before had I seen anguish on those features. "Oh, no," he whispered.

Shaking himself, like a bear making ready to charge, he asked, "What can I do?"

"First off, lend me a broom," I answered.

"Hold on," he said. "I do feel you've been rash already. Tell me your next move."

"I'm going to Siloam and learn what I can."

"I thought so." The chair screaked under Barney's shifting weight. "Steve, it won't wash. Burgling the Johnny cathedral, maybe trying to beat an admission out of some priest— No. You'd only make trouble for yourself and Ginny at a time when she needs every bit of your resources. The FBI will investigate, with professionals. You could wreck the very clues you're after, assuming they exist. Face it, you are jumping to conclusions." He considered me. "A moral point in addition. You didn't agree that mob yesterday had the right to make its own laws. Are you claiming the right for yourself?"

I took a sip and let the whisky burn its loving way down my gullet. "Ginny and I've had a while to think," I said. "We expected you'd raise the objections you do. Let me take them in order. I don't want to sound dramatic, but how can we be in worse trouble? Add anything to infinity

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and, and, and—" I must stop for another belt of booze—"you've got the same infinity.

"About the FBI being more capable. We don't aim to bull around just to be doing something; give us credit for some brains. Sure, the bureau must've had agents in the Johannine Church for a long while, dossiers on its leaders, the standard stuff. But you'll remember how at the HUAC hearings a few years back, no evidence could be produced to warrant putting the Church on the Attorney General's list, in spite of its disavowal of American traditions."

"The Johnnies are entitled to their opinions," Barney said. "Shucks, I'll agree with certain claims of theirs. This society has gotten too worldly, too busy chasing dollars and fun, too preoccupied with sex and not enough with love, too callous about the unfortunate—"

"Barney," I snapped, "you're trying to sidetrack me and cool me off, but it's no go. Either I get your help soon or I take my marbles elsewhere."

He sighed, fumbled a pipe from his tweed jacket and began stuffing it. "Okay, continue. If the Feds can't find proof that the Johannine hierarchy is engaged in activities illegal or subversive, does that prove the hierarchy is diabolically clever . . . or simply innocent?"

"Well, the Gnostics brag of having information and powers that nobody else does," I said, "and they do get involved one way or another in more and more of the social unrest going on—and mainly, who else, what else might be connected with this thing that's happened? Maybe even unwittingly; that's imaginable, but connected."

I leaned forward. "Look, Barney," I went on, "Shining Knife admits he'll have to move slow. And Washington's bound to keep him on tighter leash than he wants personally. Tomorrow, no doubt, he'll have agents interviewing various Johnnies. In the nature of the case, they'll learn nothing. You'd need mighty strong presumptive evidence to get a search warrant against a church, especially one that so many people are convinced bears the final Word of God, and most especially when the temple's a labyrinth of places that none but initiates in the various degrees are supposed to enter."

"What could you learn?" Barney replied.

"Perhaps nothing either," I said. "But I mean to act now, not a week from now, and I won't be handicapped by legal rules and public opinion, and I do have special abilities and experience in dark matters, and they won't expect me, and in short, if anything's there to find, I've the best chance in sight of finding it."

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He scowled past me.

"As for the moral issue," I said, "you may be right. On the other hand, I'm not about to commit brutalities like some imaginary Special Agent Vee Eye Eye. And in spite of Shining Knife's fear, I honestly don't see what could provoke a major invasion from the Low World. That'd bring in the Highest, and the Adversary can't afford such a confrontation.

"Which is worse, Barney, an invasion of property and privacy, maybe a profanation of a few shrines . . . or a child in hell?"

He thunked his glass down on an end table. "You win!" exploded from him.

We rose together. "How about a weapon?" he offered.

I shook my head. "Let's not compound the felony. Whatever I meet, probably a gun won't handle it." It seemed needless to add that I carried a hunting knife under my civies and, in wolf shape, a whole mouthful of armament.

"I suggest you take the Plymouth," he said. "It's not as fast as either sports job, but the spell runs quieter and the besom was tuned only the other day." He stood for a bit, thinking. Stillness and blackness pressed on the windowpanes. "Meanwhile, I'll start research on the matter. Bill Hardy . . . Janice Wenzel from our library staff . . . hm, we could co-opt your Dr. Ashman, and how about Prof. Griswold from the university? . . . and more, able, close-mouthed people, who'll be glad to help and hang any consequences. If nothing else, we can assemble all unclassified data regarding the Low Continuum, and maybe some that aren't. We can set up equations delimiting various conceivable approaches to the rescue problem and crank 'em through the computator and eliminate unworkable ideas. Yeah, I'll get busy right off."

What can you say to a guy like that except thanks?

It seemed in character for the Johannine Church to put its cathedral for the whole Upper Midwest not in Chicago, Milwaukee, or any other city, but off alone, a hundred miles even from our modest town. The location symbolized and emphasized the Gnostic rejection of this world as evil, the idea of salvation through secret rites and occult knowledge. Unlike Petrine Christianity, this kind didn't come to you; aside from dismal little chapels here and there, scarcely more than recruiting stations, you came to it.

Obvious, yes. And therefore, I thought, probably false. Nothing about Gnosticism was ever quite what it seemed. That lay in its very nature.

Perhaps its enigmas, veils behind veils and mazes within mazes, were one thing that drew so many people these days. The regular

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churches made their theologies plain. They clearly described and delimited the mysteries as such, with the common-sense remark that we mortals aren't able to understand every aspect of the Highest. They declared that this world was given us by the Creator, and hence must be fundamentally good. Was that overly unromantic? Did the Johannines appeal to the daydream, childish but always alive in us, of becoming omnipotent by learning a secret denied the common herd? No doubt that was partly true. But the more I thought, the less it felt like a whole explanation.

I had plenty of time and chance and need for thought, flitting above the night land, where scattered lights of farms and villages looked nearly as remote as the stars overhead and the air slid cold around me. Grimly, as I traveled, I set myself to review what I could about the Johannine Church, from the ground up.

Was it merely a nut cult of the past two or three generations? Or was it in truth as old as it claimed —founded by Christ himself?

The other churches said no. Doubtless Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant should not be lumped together as Petrine. But the popular word made a rough kind of sense. They did have a mutual interpretation of Jesus' charge to his apostles. They agreed on the special importance of Peter. No matter what differences had arisen since, including the question of apostolic succession, they all derived from the Twelve in a perfectly straightforward way.

And yet . . . and yet . . . there is that strange passage at the close of the Gospel According to St. John. "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" Certainly it gave rise to a fugitive tradition that here Our Lord was creating something more than any of them but John ever knew—some unproclaimed other church, within or parallel to the Church of Peter, which would at the end manifest itself and guide man to a new dispensation.

The association of such a claim with other-worldliness was almost inevitable. Under many labels, Gnosticism has been a recurring heresy. The original form, or rather forms, were an attempt to fuse Christianity with a mishmash of Oriental mystery cults, Neoplatonism, and sorcery. Legend traced it back to the Simon Magus who appears in the eighth chapter of Acts. Modern Johanninism was doubly bold in reviving that dawn-age movement by name, in proclaiming it not error but a higher truth, and Simon Magus not a corrupter but a prophet.

So you got communities of ascetics, ecstatics and mystics. They drew pilgrims, who needed housing, food, services. The priests,

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priestesses, acolytes and lay assistants did too. A temple—more accurate than "cathedral," but the Johnnies insisted on the latter word to emphasize that they were Christians—grew up, and often a community around it—like Siloam, where I was now headed.

Simple. Banal. Why did I rehearse it? Merely to escape thinking about Valeria?—No. To get as much as possible straight in my head, when most was tangled and ghostly.

The Something Else, the Thing Beyond . . . was it no illusion, but a deeper insight? And if so, an insight into what? I recalled the Johnnies' intolerance and troublemaking. I recalled the frank assertion that their adepts held powers no one else imagined, and that more was revealed to them every year. I recalled stories told by certain apostates, who hadn't advanced far in their degrees when they experienced that which scared them off: nothing illegal, immoral, or otherwise titillating; merely ugly, hateful, sorrowful, and hence not very newsworthy; deniable or ignorable by those who didn't want to believe them. I recalled the Gnostic theology, what part of it was made public: terrible amidst every twist of revelation and logic, the identification of their Demiurge with the God of the Old Testament with Satan.

I thought of Antichrist.

But there I shied off, being agnostic about such matters, as I've said. I took my stand on the simple feeling that it didn't make sense that the Almighty would operate in any such fashion.

Light glimmered into view, far off across the prairie. I was glad of journey's end, no matter what happened next. I didn't care to ride further with those reflections of mine.

Siloam was ordinary frame houses in ordinary yards along ordinary streets. A sign beneath the main airlane, as you neared, said Pop. 5240; another announced that the Lions Club met every Thursday at the Kobold Kettle Restaurant. There were a couple of small manufacturing enterprises, a city hall, an elementary school, a high school, a firehouse, a bedraggled park, a hotel, more service stations than needed. The business district held stores, a cafe or two, a bank, chirurgeon's and dentist's offices above a Rexall apothecary . . . the American works.

That homeliness made the rest freezingly alien. Though the hour lacked of midnight, downtown was a tomb. The residential streets were nearly as deserted—nobody out for a stroll, no teen-agers holding hands, scarcely a stick or a wagon moving, beneath the rare lamps—once in a while a robed and hooded figure slowly pacing.

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Each home lay drawn into itself, behind drawn shades. Where the inhabitants weren't asleep, they were probably not watching crystal or playing cards or having a drink or making love; they were most likely at the devotions and studies they hoped would qualify them for a higher religious degree, more knowledge and power and surety of salvation.

And everything centered on the cathedral. It soared above the complex of box-like ancillary buildings that surrounded it, above town and plain. The pictures I'd seen of it had not conveyed the enormity. Those flat, bone-white walls went up and up and *up*, till the roof climbed further yet to make the vast central cupola. From afar, the windows looked like nailheads, one row to a story; but then I saw the stained-glass pair, each filling half the facade it occupied with murky colors and bewildering patterns, mandala at the west end and Eye of God at the east. From the west, also, rose the single tower, which in a photograph only looked austere, but now became one leap into the stars.

Light played across the outside of the cathedral and shone dimly from its glass. I heard a chant, men's voices marching deep beneath the wild icy sweepings and soarings of women who sang on no scale I could identify, in no language of earth.

"—Helfioth Alaritha arbar Neniotho Melitho Tarasunt Chanados Umia Theirura Marada Seliso—"

The music was so amplified as to be audible to the very outskirts of town. And it never ended. This was a perpetual choir. Priests, acolytes, pilgrims were always on hand to step in when any of the six hundred and one wearied. I failed to imagine how it must be to live in that day-and-night haze of canticle. If you were a dweller in Siloam, you'd soon stop noticing on a conscious level. But wouldn't the sound weave into your thoughts, dreams, bones, finally into your soul?

And yet the attendant at the gate was a pleasant young man, his tow hair and blue eyes right out of the folk who'd been hereabouts for more than a hundred years, his friendliness out of Walt Whitman's own America. Although I was obviously a heathen by his lights, he didn't seem to think I was damned. Probably he wasn't a lay brother, just an employee, one of the decent majority you find in all organizations, all countries. He greeted me cordially and remarked on the lateness of my visit. I explained I was traveling in ankhs, had gotten hung up and must start again early tomorrow, but wanted to hear the choir. He showed me where to leave my stick on the parking lot, gave me a leaflet, and waved me in.

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The auxiliary buildings formed a square around a paved yard centered on the cathedral. Walls had been raised between them, making the only entrances three portals closable by wire gates. The offices, storerooms, living quarters were plain, in fact drab. A few cenobites moved about, male scarcely distinguishable from female in their robes and overshadowing cowls. I remembered the complete absence of any scandals, anywhere in the world, though the Johannines mingled the sexes in celibacy. Well, of course their monks and nuns weren't simply consecrated; they were initiates. They had gone beyond baptism, beyond the elementary mystery rites and name-changing (with the old public name retained for secular use) that corresponded to a Petrine confirmation. For years they had mortified the flesh, disciplined the soul, bent the mind to mastering what their holy books called divine revelation, and unbelievers called pretentious nonsense, and some believers in a different faith called unrecognized diabolism.

. . .

Blast it, I thought, I've got to concentrate on my job. Never mind those silent, sad figures rustling past. Ignore, if you can, the overwhelmingness of the cathedral you are nearing and the chant that now swells from it to fill the whole night. Deny that your werewolf heritage senses things it fears to a degree that is making you ill. Sweat prickles forth on your skin, runs cold down your ribs and reeks in your nostrils. You see the world through a haze of dream and relentless music. But Valeria is in hell.

I stopped where the vague, shifty light was strongest and read the leaflet. It bade me a courteous welcome and listed the regulations for tourists. On the flip side was a floor plan of the basilica section of the main building. The rest was left blank. Everybody realized that an abundance of rooms existed in the levels of the north and south sides, the tower, and even the cupola. It was no secret that great crypts ran beneath. They were used for certain ceremonies—parts of them, anyhow. Beyond this information: nothing. The higher in degree you advanced, the more you were shown. Only adepts might enter the final sanctums, and only they knew what went on there.

I mounted the cathedral steps. A couple of husky monks stood on either side of the immense, open door. They didn't move, but their eyes frisked me. The vestibule was long, low-ceilinged, whitewashed, bare except for a holy water font. Here was no cheerful clutter of bulletin board, parish newsletter, crayon drawings from the Sunday school. A nun standing at the middle pointed me to a left entrance.

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Another one at that position looked from me to a box marked OFFERINGS and back until I had to stuff in a couple of dollars. It might have been funny except for the singing, the incense, the gazes, the awareness of impalpable forces which drew my belly muscles taut.

I entered an aisle and found myself alone in a roped-off section of pews, obviously for outsiders. It took me a minute to get over the impact of the stupendous interior and sit down. Then I spent several more minutes trying to comprehend it, and failing.

The effect went beyond size. When everything was undecorated, naked white geometry of walls and pillars and vaulting, you had nothing to scale by; you were in a cavern that reached endlessly on. God's Eye above the altar, mandala above the choir loft, dominated a thick dusk. But they were unreal too, like the candles glimmering from place to place. Proportions, curves, intersections, all helped create the illusion of illimitable labyrinthine spaces. Half a dozen worshipers, scattered along the edge of the nave, were lost. But so would any possible congregation be. This church was *meant* to diminish its people.

A priest stood at the altar with two attendants. I recognized them by their white robes as initiates. At their distance they were dwarfed nearly to nothing. Somehow the priest was not. In the midnight-blue drapery and white beard of an adept, he stood tall, arms outspread, and I feared him. Yet he wasn't moving, praying, anything. . . . Smoke from the hanging censers drugged my lungs. The choir droned and shrilled above me. I had never felt more daunted.

Hauling my glance away, I forced myself to study the layout as if this were an enemy fortress to be penetrated: which it was, for me tonight, whether or not it bore any guilt for what had happened to my little girl. The thought of her started a rage brewing that soon got strong enough to serve for courage. My witch-sight didn't operate here; counter-spells against such things must have been laid. Normal night vision was adapting, though, stretched to the same ultimate as every other faculty I had.

The noncommunicants' section was as far as could be from the altar, at the end of the extreme left side aisle. So on my right hand were pews reaching to the nave, on my left a passage along the north wall. The choir loft hung above me like a thundercloud. This isn't helping me figure out how to burgle the joint, I thought.

A monk went past me on soft-sandaled feet. Over his robe he wore a long surplice embroidered with cabalistic symbols. Halfway to the transept he halted before a

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many-branched sconce, lit a candle, and prostrated himself for minutes. Rising, bowing, and backing off seven steps, he returned in my direction.

From pictures, I recognized his outer garment as the one donned by choristers. Evidently he'd been spelled and, instead of taking straight off to shuck the uniform, had acquired a bit of merit first. When he'd gone by, I twisted around to follow his course. The pews left some clear space at the rear end. The choral balcony threw it into such gloom that I could barely see the monk pass through a door in the corner nearest me.

The idea burst forth like a pistol from the holster. I sat outwardly still, inwardly crouched, and probed from side to side of the basilica. Nobody was paying attention to me. Probably I wasn't even visible to celebrants or worshipers; this placement was designed to minimize the obtrusiveness of infidels. My ears, which beneath the clamant song picked out the monk's footfalls, had detected no snick of key in lock. I could follow him.

Then what? I didn't know and didn't greatly care. If they nailed me at once, I'd be a Nosy Parker. They'd scold me and kick me out, and I'd try some different approach. If I got caught deeper in the building—well, that was the risk I'd come courting.

I waited another three hundred million microseconds, feeling each one. The monk needed ample time to get out of this area. During the interval I knelt, gradually hunching lower and lower until I'd sunk out of sight. It drew no stares or inquiries. Finally I was on all fours.

Now! I scuttled, not too fast, across to that shadowy corner. Risen, I looked behind me. The adept stood like a gaunt eidolon, the initiates handled the four sacred objects in complicated ways, the choir sang, a man signed himself and left via the south aisle. I waited till he had exited before gripping the doorknob. It felt odd. I turned it most slowly and drew the door open a crack. Nothing happened. Peering in, I saw dim blue lights.

I went through.

Beyond was an anteroom. A drapery separated it from a larger chamber, which was also deserted. That condition wouldn't last long. The second of the three curtained openings gave on a spiral staircase down which the hymn came pouring. The third led to a corridor. Most of the space was occupied by racks on which hung surplices. Obviously you borrowed one after receiving your instructions elsewhere, and proceeded to the choir loft. At the end of your period, you came back this way. Given six hundred and one singers, reliefs must show quite often.

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Maybe they weren't so frequent at night, when the personnel were clergy with more training and endurance than eager-beaver laymen. But I'd best not stick around.

I unsnapped the sheath from my inner belt and stuffed my knife in a jacket pocket before stepping into the hall.

(To be concluded next month)

In the May issue of

Venture Science Fiction

HOUR OF THE HORDE, an action-filled adventure novel of intergalactic warfare, complete in one issue by GORDON R. DICKSON. Also, six new short stories, by K. M. O'Donnell, Bryce Walton and many others. Also, Ron Goulart reports on some books; walks out on others. Also, F. Feghoot. VENTURE is on sale now; bother your local newsdealer.

Coming soon in F&SF

During the past decade, the most sought-after back issues of this magazine have been those special issues that have been devoted to the work of three of the leading writers in this field: Theodore Sturgeon, September 1962; Ray Bradbury, May 1963; Isaac Asimov, October 1966. We are now pleased to announce the publication of a fourth such issue, devoted to a writer who (as Judith Merril puts it in a biographical/critical piece that will appear in the issue) "for thirty years has been entertaining, inspiring, irritating, enlightening and delighting a growing audience." That writer is **Fritz Leiber.** The many thousands of readers who have come to know the consistent quality and astonishing variety of his fiction will be pleased to know that the issue will be centered about a brand-new novella written for this issue by Mr. Leiber. The special Fritz Leiber issue is scheduled for July 1969; if you send us the coupon on page 60, you'll be sure of a copy.

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William C. Abeel was born and raised in Texas—he is a former president of the Commercial Union Life Insurance Company of Texas—and now lives in San Francisco, in a home interesting and elegant enough to be written up in a recent issue of San Francisco *magazine. He formerly owned a chateau in southern France, which is the setting for this gripping tale of a sculptor who is commissioned to reproduce a statue that is a local legend, a dream assignment that turns into a nightmare . . .*

THE BEAST OF MOURYESSA

by William C. Abeel

GEORGE AULL FOLLOWED THE man in the faded blue cap. In a back corridor, at the end of a hall, they stopped before a small door. The uniformed attendant lifted the ring of keys attached by a chain to his belt and unlocked the rusty padlock. A second key fitted an older turnbolt; the third opened a modern barrel lock. Had the attendant shown a sense of humor, Aull would have taken the performance for a charade of Gallic wit on cuckoldry.

The attendant demonstrated no desire to enter. "Voila, monsieur!" he said, stepping back. Aull opened the door and felt inside for the light switch.

A classified ad placed months earlier in the Paris *Herald Tribune* had brought him a contract to reproduce a statue that was a local legend. Having been given an old archaeological book in which photographs of the Beast appeared, he presumed the original figure had long ago been sent away to a distant museum. Overhearing a conversation in the local wine shop, he discovered to his surprise that the figure was only sixty kilometers away in Avignon. When he expressed a desire to see it, Madame Renaud, his patroness, explained that access to the room before which he now stood was difficult to obtain.

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Unearthed in a field to the side of the chateau where Aull was now employed, the animal—if that is what it could be called—had become associated with the property. Its likeness swung from the windvane on the tower, and the chateau's misfortunes were attributed to the figure having been unearthed there. The local peasants wondered why the owner wished it reproduced at all. They whispered that Madame Renaud was in league with the Beast and that it had befriended her. Such notions bloom easily in Provence's superstitious atmosphere. Others claimed she retained her beauty by taking small doses of arsenic. A beautiful woman living alone draws jealous comments.

It was true that after she bought the ten hectares and began restoring the structure, the orchards bloomed, the fields replanted in grapes produced bountifully, and even the towering cypress hedges seemed to take heart and thicken against the howl of the mistral. Before that, wives of owners who had not come to other ruin, ran away or openly cuckolded their husbands. The tales began when a fieldhand's pick struck something in the ground, deflecting the pick's point into his leg. Blood poisoning set in; the man died in days. The same day its discoverer died in agony, other workers were trying to load the figure onto a cart. Its weight shifted, the cart tilted, and the figure fell, crushing one of the men. The driver of the vehicle taking it to Avignon returned home to find that his only son had drowned.

Shortly after it was invested in the museum, the curator murdered his wife and her lover. Exonerated by the courts, he was found hanged in a room beside the Beast. The stone figure's outrageous genitals were not touched on by the stories in the journals, nor was there any implication that the Beast's curse was involved in this "crime de passion," as the press called it. Nevertheless, the figure was taken from public display and put in a small, closet-like room. A letter from someone of archaeological significance or local importance was necessary to view it.

Aull's success as a sculptor lay in his ability to identify with his subjects; a rider's square-set jaw, a sea captain's broad forehead, an athlete's thick arms—the right heavier than the left. In working with the female figure, he tended to identify himself as the lover, caressing the thighs with the steel point, smoothing the breasts. The seed of his growing uneasiness about the Beast may have been sewn by the village baker when he asked, "Why do you make the Beast of Mouryessa? Why not two nice dogs? Perhaps lions for the gate?" The expression on his face had been that of a man finding a spider in a shirt half put on.

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"Draw the devil and you get the devil," an old woman had muttered in his presence. One thing was certain, the villagers' attitude toward him had changed; hospitality had turned to suspicion.

When his fingers pressed a toggle switch inside the door, a single bulb suspended from a cord went on. The French, he thought as he stepped inside, are not given to strong bulbs in municipal buildings; the light barely illuminated the corners of the room. Closing the door, he was conscious of the dampness, and the lower temperature inside. The room was filled with a disagreeable odor. One of decay. The plaster had cracked and fallen away from one wall, leaving the stone exposed. No one had bothered to sweep the refuse up; it made unsteady footing.

The figure seemed to fill most of the space; the pedestal on which the Beast stood raised its head nearly to the light bulb. Sitting upright in the attitude of a judge, its two cloven hooves rested on human heads. Famine ribs were cut in a barrel chest; heavy shoulders, hunched together, wore a mane of wart-like knots. The penis reached up the belly to the base of its chest. The skull, shot forward like an extended pistol, was set with pig-like eyes. The jaw, long and threatening, framed great, pointed teeth. The eyes, little as there was to be seen of them, appeared ready to consider the victim's fate, only concerning the manner of his death. Malevolent son of a bitch, Aull thought as he walked around the statue. The exact dimensions had not been given in the archaeological book. He had misjudged its size; it was bigger than he had thought. The knotted hair on the neck still held the original detail. The eyes were deeper set than shown in the reproduction, the expression more menacing. He could see now that what he had taken for a mustache and goatee broken away by the digger's pick, was in reality a man held crushed between its jaws.

Placing the camera on the Beast's knee, he loaded the roll of film he had just bought. Its leg was clammy and disagreeable to touch. He finished the job, with more difficulty, against his own leg and placed a bulb in the reflector. Holding the small reflex camera upside down, he sighted in the square as he focused the mechanism. When the focus was exact, the dim overhead light shining on the lense made the Beast appear to smile at him. He lowered the camera and looked at the figure again. It was not smiling. Its expression was grim. Looking into the square glass again, it seemed very definitely to smile—a wry, malevolent smile. He lowered the camera more suddenly. The room was very close; it lacked oxygen. His palms felt wet, but cold. The dampness. He would not be put

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off by a curiosity of lighting. He raised the camera overhead again and fired the bulb almost before he had it in position. As it went off, he could see in the square that he was not mistaken; it was smiling.

Backing against the wall, he stumbled on the broken plaster. No. It was not smiling. He must get a grip on himself. It was absurd to allow old wives' tales to affect him like this. He was not being affected; it was the closeness of the room. Moving counterclockwise around the figure, he took a picture from each of the other three sides as rapidly as possible.

Just as the flash went off each time, he looked into the square. From each side, it seemed to smile. It was obviously the lighting. He left hurriedly and went down the steps of the museum. There were six shots left in the camera. Why waste them? He set his mind back in place by taking two exposures of the pope's palace, one of a fountain, and the rest of the activity on the Place of the Clock, viewed from the restaurant's terrace where he had a Pernod.

It was curious that he had allowed a small room to make him feel that way. Possibly, some claustrophobia lurked in him.

Leaving the film in a camera shop on the corner of the Place, he drove back along a road winding through orchards protected from the wind by cypress hedges and cane fences. They gave the flat, irrigated countryside a curiously geometrical appearance.

It was late in the day when he reached the chateau, but he went directly to work again. Laying his shirt and the archaeological book on a stone table beside the figure, he began at the neck while his memory of the detail—the knotted hair—was still fresh. The shadows of the platan trees threw shifting movements of shade on the statue and the tower beside which he worked. Perspiration glistened on his arms as the mallet fell on the chisel. The only other sound was that of sheep bells along the roadway. Although a wall and a stream separated the courtyard from the road, the clarity of the air made the two sounds seem to ring from one source. He squinted as the chisel's flat end caught the sun.

"Good afternoon, Monsieur Aull," Madame Renaud's voice came from behind him. The sound of steel on steel had masked her steps across the gravel. He was glad to be found working on the animal's shoulders. Once, when she had watched him carving on the Beast's genitals, he had been seized with a sudden desire to strike them in half with a crossblow of the chisel. In the privacy of his studio, the Beast's outrageous parts would have merely struck him as humorous. To work on them before her, made him feel he was in some way competing

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against himself as a man. He had come to object to the figure in proportion to his increasing awareness of Madame Renaud's femininity.

Why did she want this figure reproduced? It was as much of a mystery to him as to the local peasants. Yet, he had come to feel he was in some way involved in an unspoken contract with Madame Renaud. As the statue approached completion, he was more certain the contract involved some personal relationship with her—perhaps between the three of them.

It's going well," she said. "Did you get what you wanted in Avignon?" Her voice seemed to tease him. Did she sense there had been something peculiar in his visit to the museum? He turned and looked at her. She was smiling; open, charmingly.

"I took the pictures." If Madame Renaud was ten years too old for him, she was nevertheless a lovely woman. Her skin appeared to have been smoothed by a sculptor's thumb. Could arsenic really do this? He wished it was her form he had been asked to copy. He could have done a memorable thing with her hair pulled back at the sides in rejection of Paris styles that had come to bore her.

"Monsieur and Madame Pezet will be here for dinner," she said.

"Ah, bon! There's something I've been wanting to ask him."

"You'll have your chance tonight. You'll be dining with us."

He tried to read in her eyes the answers to the questions in his mind. Whatever secret she held, he was certain it was involved with his suspicion he might be invited to be her lover.

Generally, he dined alone at a table in the garden. He was served good wine and choice cuts, but ate apart from the field and domestic help as well as his chatelaine. It was clear to him the arrangement was not aimed so much at social distinction as to avoid local gossip. When Monsieur Pezet and his wife, or the village mayor came to dine, he was always invited to join them in the vaulted dining room on the second floor.

Ever since the last dinner, he had felt that this next time, he might be asked to stay upstairs. Once there, his own room being midway in the tower, the servants could not be sure when or whether he had come down. It only depended on Monsieur and Madame Pezet being told farewell at the top of the stairs. He would see. Still; there was a foreboding about the whole situation. Some of the uneasiness of the museum's room crept back into him. Madame Renaud smiled at him again and, shifting the basket of ranunculus she had picked, turned and went into the building. He watched her cross the gravel yard. Her hips and waist were well sculpted too.

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It was not unpleasant to play the role of the man of the house. In his youth he had lain awake at night dreaming of a castle where he would sit in a vaulted dining room, being served by servants with starched lace at their collars and cuffs. In his dreams their shoes were buckled with silver, and everything was carried on silver trays. In the evenings, when he dined with Madame Renaud and her guests, it half came true.

He would take his time dressing. He wished his sports coat was better pressed. Picking up his shirt, he carried his tools into the arch beneath the *auvent*. A great timber he had aided workmen carrying there, lay in one corner. He sat on it, picking at the wood with the end of the chisel. It was pleasantly cool. When he thought again of Avignon, he was embarrassed at having been victimized by a ridiculous illusion. Putting the chisel in his toolbox, he crossed the garden and entered his room from the steep outside steps.

The chateau, like all large buildings in the countryside of Provence, was oriented toward the south. The ground on the north side was a story higher than on the south, to protect the courtyard from the wind. The buildings gave an appearance of having turned their backs and hunched their shoulders against the mistral. Once inside he closed the door and bolted it. After he had leisurely bathed and dressed, he entered the tower through the other door to his room. As he shut it behind him, the door at the foot of the tower clicked shut. He paused to see who would come up. When no one appeared, he descended the steps to see who had come in. The base of the tower was empty. He opened the lower door to the outside. No one was there. He opened the door into the kitchen. At the moment, the kitchen was empty. Someone must have started up, forgotten something or changed his mind, then gone back out. There was a curious odor at the bottom of the tower. It was faint, but distinctive; it was not cooking. He could not quite place it. Remounting the tower past his room, he entered the upper level of the chateau. Directly ahead was the vaulted dining room.

As he opened the door, he could hear the voices of the guests. "It will be very nice," Madame Pezet was saying. He had no trouble following dinner conversation; a year had allowed him to become much at home in this country.

"Ah, here he is now," Monsieur Pezet said, when he saw him enter.

Madame Renaud wore a black dress sewn with glistening stones. Her sleek hair and dark lashes gave her an appearance that would have suited a queen from the caves beneath the spring.

Lamb was served stuffed with herbs from the surrounding hill-

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sides, and the wine was from nearby Chateau Neuf-du-Pape. The courses were served on silver trays, and the domestic's uniforms were starched, if not trimmed with lace. His appetite was good and the wine was strong. Toward the middle of the meal, Monsieur Pezet said, "I was able to see your animal." Madame Pezet inspected the manner in which the lights were set in the arches of the ceiling. "It is a good likeness. Where did you get the stone?"

"From here. Tell me . . . were you here when they found the statue?"

Before becoming principal of the local school, Monsieur Pezet had assisted at the museum in cataloging facts concerning archaeological discoveries of the area. "In the old days," he said, "we did not have to dig. Things turned up by themselves. Plowing. No, I was not here."

"But you are acquainted with it?"

"Yes. I was raised here. They were interested in my opinion."

"And, what was it?"

"Mmmm . . . I had several."

"Tell me," Aull leaned forward and took up his refilled glass, "was there anything peculiar about it? I've heard so many stories."

Monsieur Pezet sat back in his chair and removed his pince-nez. "This is a curious area. The spring here . . . it was a temple. Altar, in olden times. There were many strange cults. Some were founded near water sources. Sometimes the elements intruded. There is an underground river here. Well-diggers strike it. The stone would indicate that this . . . this underground river was at some time exposed."

"And about the superstitions?"

"I am from Provence. I have grown up here. It is difficult for me to disregard." He dabbed at his mouth with the napkin. "Very difficult, but I am an educated man."

"An educator," Madame Renaud prompted.

"Thank you," he nodded and replaced his pince-nez. Madame Pezet now considered it safe to let her eyes take note of the conversation.

"But you have not told me your opinions."

"What is there to say? There have been things that have happened. There are beliefs that a world existed under the ground; Wagner, the Nibelungs." He dabbed his chin again. "This whole area is honeycombed with caverns, underground caves with no entrances. A whole world glittering in the darkness. It is no more difficult to imagine than people living on clouds. More easy, no?"

"And the local people?"

"Ah, yes! I know. I do not hold with them. These cults were of another era. We are after all, my dear Monsieur Aull, in the modern era, the Christian era."

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"The year of one thousand nine hundred and sixty-nine," Madame Renaud put in politely.

"Still," said Monsieur Pezet, "there are those who believe that some things buried in the ground bear the seed of life and drawn by the sun, seek light again. Others," he seemed to be having trouble finding the right words, "belong to the ground, and should remain there."

"But, surely . . ."

Madame Renaud signaled to the domestics to refill the glasses.

"What was the area like where you were born, monsieur? Was it all so different from here?" Madame Renaud asked.

The heavy wine of the Midi was beginning to go to Aull's head. "Ah," he took a deep draught from the glass. "I was born in Ohio. It's flat there." He sat back in his chair. "It did not have mountains rising behind it. But as a child, I raised them in my imagination. I would lie in bed at night listening to the locomotives fifing across the plains." His words were musical to him now. "I'd seem to see lights from the train's windows fluttering across the fields, and dreamt of going to distant places where I would be remembered as the man who had done something unusual, something people would recall.

"I think that's why I became a sculptor. From my mother, I received the germ of art. To raise six children, she painted birds on china cups." Riding the wine, his mind began to branch out into a spectrum view of his own life. "From my father I received the urge to travel. He was a traveler, and an inventor. Like Galileo, he invented a telescope of sorts. Looking through the neck of a rye bottle, he could see further than a ship's captain from the tallest bridge; stars, hemispheres, constellations, unfounded hopes, and light-years of escape. He loved music too. His favorite instruments were the drum of the train wheel on the track. And the locomotive whistle. He preferred the B. and O. A man of simple tastes."

Madame Renaud was watching him carefully now.

"I was drawn to sculpture because therein one creates something almost alive. A sculptor breathes life into the stone. No . . . he does something else. He frees it! It's already there. You see," he leaned further back in his chair and described a piece of stone in the air. "Something lives in every piece of stone. It is captured. A prisoner. Perhaps forever . . . but it only needs the sculptor to liberate it.

"Let me explain to you about sculpture. It's not like music. Music, like speech, has a tendency to disappear. Unless the paper on which characters are written changes hands with care, they become lost. This fragility gives

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them their nature, their ability to raise our spirits. And it accounts for their inability to sustain us. Thrown in the air from a throat or a violin, they disappear like smoke. The guitar's a good example. It's the most melancholy of instruments because it strikes a dying note, a note that recedes even as it is played. The ear and the heart reach out for it as it vanishes. This makes us sad. Sculpture's not like that. The seed . . . the kernel of the figure is in the stone. The sculptor tears the husk away and leaves a permanent object for your pleasure."

"You can see why I selected Monsieur Aull to sculpture my faithful guardian," said Madame Renaud. The manner in which she spoke the compliment, and reconsideration of his own words, brought back the uneasiness that had plagued him lately.

Throughout the dinner his expectations of the evening's end flickered in the back of his mind. When the dinner was over, he was surprised and disappointed to be bidden goodnight at the top of the stairs with the Pezets.

"A delightful evening," Monsieur Pezet told him. "You are a sensitive young man. An intelligent thinker." His wife nodded in silent agreement. "But you are a stranger here. I would not . . ." he seemed to be having difficulty again finding the right words. "Ah-h-hum!" He cleared his throat in embarrassment, then stood erect, pleased with a new idea. "You are a visitor. I must not give you advice. When you can, I wish you to advise me. Will you please come by the school. We have been given a modern sculpture. I would appreciate your opinion." Madame Pezet had taken his arm; they were leaving.

When they had gone, he walked out in the dark and looked at the figure. "Bastard!" he said out loud, kicking its base. Should have kicked it higher up, he thought, closing the lower tower door behind him.

Late that night he lay in his room listening to the owl called the *choucette.* It called from a thicket of *ronce* on the other side of the wall. In the platan outside, another answered. These were the only sounds in the night.

It surprised him when he became aware of a third sound, an unfamiliar one. Where did it come from? Overhead? There it was again. A low moaning.

He stood up and looked out of the window. Only the two *chouettes.* He ran his hand over his forearm. The hair bristled there.

He walked to the wall and lay his ear against it. Nothing. With a feeling of uneasiness, he opened his door into the tower. For a moment, he stood listening. Closing the door, he made sure the bolt was shot.

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In bed, he heard it again; an emotional, throat sound, almost of passion, more like two voices than one. A woman's and another more bass.

Should he investigate? He rose up on one elbow. It might prove embarrassing to him. He would go to sleep. No doubt it was something he could not see outside. At length he fell asleep.

The next day, he drove to Avignon for the photographs. At the last minute, he thought to take the camera. If the prints were not perfect, he could always take others.

Parking on the Place of the Clock, he entered the camera shop. The bright sunlight of Provence had convinced him that he had imagined the whole thing the night before. Too much wine. He had been too talkative. Too much talk, and definitely too much wine.

"Four francs seventy," the man said, handing him the envelope. He took the pictures out. There were two of the pope's palace. The one of the fountain was not well focused; he had been careless. The people before the cafe came out well enough in spite of the shade. There were no other prints.

He held the roll of negatives against the light in the shop's door. Unrolling it, he saw all others were blank. How could it be? It was his carelessness. He bought a second roll, loaded the camera, checked the number of flash bulbs in the sack attached to the camera case and drove back to the museum.

Yes, it was unusual that he had come without a second letter. Yes, he should have realized that another letter would be demanded. But it was fifty-seven kilometers to Madame Renaud's chateau, and he was here only yesterday.

When the guard opened the locks, Aull felt he had conceded only because he felt he was doing him no favor. There was the damp smell again, almost of an earthen crypt. Having no desire to stay longer than necessary, he fixed a bulb in the camera, focused, and looked up to check his angle. The nostril line was drawn around the mouth almost to the ear. It left little space in the top of the skull for the slit of the eye. Its ear was almost nonexistent, as if it did not wish to hear, as if its mind was already made up. A stone figure? It had no mind. By God, he laughed to himself, it had one hell of a . . .

Then it happened. The eye blinked . . . Preposterous! Aull was very uncomfortable. The figure seemed to take up too much of the room, but he realized he was mistaken. A fixed stare invites the trompe l'oeil. He extended his head forward and scrutinized the eye more carefully. It blinked again!

Forgetting the picture, he felt

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for the door with his hand, and backed out of the room without bothering to turn off the light. He had seen the figure twice; he had no further need for photographs.

All the way to the chateau, he wrestled with the illusion. He did not understand how he could have been fooled, but it surely had not blinked. He recalled once hearing voices behind a closed door and being told afterwards that no one had been in the room at that time. He always wondered if the girl who had told him this had been talking with someone whose identity she wished to conceal, or—as he had never caught her in a lie—if his ears had played him a trick. Jealousy might do that. He had heard the words and been told that there were no words, that there "could not possibly have been any words." He had seen the figure blink, but a stone figure cannot blink. The fluttering pattern of the sun through the tunnel of leaves that lined the road made his rationalization acceptable to him. Not being easily given to fear, his sense of humor prevailed, and he laughed out loud at himself.

As he drove past Saint Andiol, large clouds were building up in the anvil over the Alpilles. By the time he reached Orgaon, the blackness extended over half the sky. When he reached the chateau, it was thundering. The workers had finished their dinner. Madame Renaud had retired. Because of the threatening weather, he was served dinner in a room off the kitchen. Throughout the meal, the sight of the Beast's wink came back to him. For some reason, he saw Madame Renaud each time he thought of it.

Well, he was the sculptor. The animal in the courtyard was in his hands. He could let it out, or leave it in the stone. If he wished, he could cut it off at the neck. Better still, he would cut off its . . . Once again his sense of humor had prevailed. The thunder was increasing when he went to his room. Wine and food had made him drowsy. The lights went out downstairs. There were no lights on above when he heard the door at the bottom of the tower open and shut.

For a moment he heard nothing more. Then he thought someone was mounting the steps in the tower. The sound went away. Something brushed against his door. It was as if someone in a harsh coat had rubbed against it in passing. He was wide-awake now.

There were no more sounds on the steps, but in a moment, the door at the top of the steps opened softly and shut. He was on his feet. He opened the tower door. It creaked. Listening, he heard nothing. As his eyes became accustomed to the blacker dark of the tower's interior, he could see

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around the turns. There was nothing but the foreign odor. What was it? He shuddered. Shutting the door, he bolted it. His imagination was running away with him. He had been in remote spots of the world too long; it was time to go home. In a day he could fake what was necessary to finish the work. He always spent too much time on details no one ever noticed. Why exhaust his pride on a statue he would never see again?

There were no *chouettes* tonight, only thunder. He was almost asleep when he heard the noises. This time, he did not get up, but listened intently. A woman's voice mounted in a series of small cries. It was as if she was in pain, exquisite pain. If anything was wrong, she would call out. It did not make sense. In so small a village, Madame Renaud could not have a lover without it being common knowledge. He would have heard of it in town. Jokes would have been made.

Who could it be? Not Monsieur Pezet who always came to dinner with his wife. Not the mayor. Madame Renaud was no ordinary woman. Her grace and style were more of the candlelit salons of Paris than remote Provence. There was no one here who would seem to qualify as a lover. Still—was it Victor Hugo who wrote, "There are doe who replace their cerf by the boar"?

Why would anyone wear a heavy coat on a summer night? To conceal identity? Why did it concern him so? If she was in danger, she would call out. Was it fear for Madame Renaud? Was it another thing he felt. Jealousy? Why had she allowed someone in the upper area of the house, and not him? Who was the stranger? Just then a piercing cry came from above, the cry of a woman in the throes of passion. He sat up. There was no doubt about what he felt now. It was lust. If the person upstairs was the devil himself, he wished it was he. The cry was overrun by a clap of thunder; the sky opened up and the rain came down. The mistral had begun.

When the North Sea turns its cold on Europe, clouds roll across the plains of the northern countries and bank against the Alp's barrier. If the tallest mountains in Europe cannot digest or encompass the storm, it spills out between the Alps and that high range called the Massif Central and comes roaring down through the cut made in the continent by the Rhone. Pressed into this narrowness, it accelerates. The last chute before Avignon is a notch in the Vaucluse. There, the small town of Oppede-le-Vieux has resisted the wind since the Middle Ages. But in the days when the pope was in Avignon, murder and rape committed by persons in

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Oppede-le-Vieux were absolved if they occurred after the third day of the mistral. A roaring wind encompassed the house, the branches of the platan trees bent, water came down in sheets. He rose to look out of his window. The ford across the stream that held only pools of tadpoles was flowing. Someone was moving about in the dark. A strange feeling ran through him; then he recognized Costa, the gardener. He was shouting for others to come out to the kitchen. Something was wrong.

Without bothering to put on his shirt, Aull pulled on shoes and trousers and hurried down the steps. At the bottom, he remembered the strange sounds, jerked open the door, and joined those leaving the kitchen. The rain was cold on his shoulders. Someone handed him a shovel. It was like being able to breathe under water at the bottom of a lake. Men and women were attempting to throw dirt up where the brown rope of water was eating away the dike along the creek. The rope thickened as he shoveled. Realizing he was ankle deep in water and that the dirt was washing off the shovel faster than he could lift it, he shoveled faster. The current worked beneath his feet; he lost footing and almost fell. Water was at his knees now. The others were making their way back to the kitchen. Costa signaled him to come along.

The courtyard was hip deep in swirling water. As he reached its center, a table carrying a half bottle of wine and two glasses floated out of the kitchen door and advanced uncertainly toward the corner of the garden. Bottles, paper and small objects floated everywhere. He recognized the tank used for spraying the orchards. Then, from the open arches of the summer dining room, the great timber advanced into the garden. As if by levitation, it floated out around him and toward the corner of the building. Aull shuddered again, feeling that some power he had never dealt with was afoot. In the kitchen, the domestics were trying to pile things not already afloat higher on shelves. It suddenly occurred to him that he had not seen the stone figure.

Returning into the rain, he searched that corner of the courtyard. Perhaps the force of the water had undermined and overturned it. Although the water was hip deep in this corner, he was able to feel along the ground. There was the stone table. He could not find the figure. He returned to the kitchen, and as there was nothing he could do there, he mounted the steps to his room.

In his haste he had left his door open. The odor he had noticed was in his room. He turned on the light, inspected the room

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carefully, then shut and bolted the door. Something was wrong. He would leave in the morning. What of Madame Renaud? The sound of the rain made as much noise as the storm now. It was as if the forces of nature were trying, one last time, the great walls and roof of the chateau. Whipped by a fury that seemed unnatural, the storm backed off and hurled itself against the structure. The beams shuddered; tiles gave away and could be heard clattering down the sides of the roof. Over this, he heard what he took for a cry for help.

Taking a chisel from his sack in the corner of the room, he opened the door and mounted the stairs. Water was running down the walls from a leak at the top of the tower; the upper door was swollen tightly shut. He put the chisel in its crack, hit it sharply with the heel of his hand and levered back as he pulled at the knob. The door opened. The odor that had disturbed him was stronger inside. There was light coming from beneath the door to the furthest rooms. As he crossed toward them he took a firmer grip on the chisel. Reaching the door, he could hear no sound. "Madame Renaud?" he said, as he opened the door.

As it swung open, he was startled by the interior of the room he had never seen. Its high ceiling, supported by heavy beams, sloped toward the north. The one north window was set high in the wall, with steps to it losing themselves in drapery hung in swags from its pinnacle to the floor. To the left of the window was a bed made of brass filigree mounted with crystal finials. The spider-like canopy rose to a crowned peak trailing sheer, black material caught back against its four supports. Behind the bed, the wall was pierced with small arch-like alcoves like a dovecote. These openings, rising in a curve as high as the window, carried in them small, glistening objects. There were crystals, bits of stone that glowed, small statuettes, what appeared to be an enormous tooth, an iridescent blue butterfly pinned to a shriveled orange, a monkey's skull, and in one, dried rose buds.

In the center of the room, a chandelier held by a chain running through a ring in the ceiling and attached to another against the wall, carried lit candles. There was no other light in the room. Madame Renaud stood between the bed and the only other door in the room. In her nightdress, she was even more beautiful. Her hands were clutched to her breast; her face was flushed. Something in her stance gave her the appearance of having been apprehended with a forbidden lover.

She glanced furtively toward a second door. Without speaking, he advanced toward it. It was the bath. The recessed tub was sur-

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rounded by coquillé that shown green in the reflected light. One small window hung open; rain poured in. It was cold. He had been chilled to the bone in the rain. He shut the window. The bathroom was empty except for the animal odor that was strongest here. Now he was sure. It was the odor of the room in the museum. Yet, somehow he was no longer afraid. The storm had set stronger feelings in him.

Retracing his steps, he found she had not moved. Behind her, on the bed, lay a thick brown fur. He stood hypnotized, watching her. She took a step back, and the calf of her leg came in contact with the bed. An enormous bolt of thunder shook the walls. The beams groaned as the vibration of the storm grew up through his legs like a poisonous vine inside the bone. Her mouth moved; it was saying something, but he could not hear the "No . . . No!" He could not hear her cry out. Like the people of Oppede-le-Vieux, he was one with the storm.

As she stood frozen in this position, he began to free her from the husk about her. Taking the soft material between his fingers, he tore it slowly from top to bottom. She emerged naked from between the long strips peeled away. He could not tell if she resisted; her strength was no match for fingers accustomed to the rape of stone.

Fearing his statue incarnate, now relaxed against him, might fall to the floor, he lifted her and laid her gently on the fur. With the storm pounding in his body, he let himself down into the warmth of six hundred years' gentle blood that opened like a red hibiscus to receive him. For some while he lay listening to the drive of the storm. It seemed to be lessening. He could hear a woman crying. Rolling over, he stood up; his feet were unsteady.

The woman lay face down. There was blood on the fur. He could no longer smell the strange odor that had permeated the room. Pulling the covers over her hips and legs, he half stumbled back to the door of the tower, and to his room. What had he done? Had he imagined things that had inflamed his mind? Had he become the Beast? Was the scent he had smelled, his own fear? His own lust? What would the morning bring? Confrontations, accusations, his arrest, imprisonment?

He thought he heard a noise on the tower stairs. Steps? He listened; he was mistaken. No, there it was again. The scraping sound, and just outside his door. Then there was a scratching. More of a clawing. The odor was very strong now. It was the odor of a bear pit, of the closed room in the museum. A guttural, snarling noise came from behind the door. What

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was there? In his mind he saw the brown fur on the bed in the room above, the cramped room of the museum, the pointed teeth, the pig-like eyes, an animal with a mane of knotted warts and a stone penis. Did it know what had happened? Had it been part of the plan? Had it drawn him on? Had she sent it after him, or was it her lover and he, the interloper? The odor from beneath the door was sickening. Its breath? In his mind, the horror inside the tower bulged against the door, threatening the heavy oak and the forged bolt. Terror entered him unmasked. Whatever was in the tower could not get out.

Opening his door to the outside, he fled down the steps to the sloping ground. An animal howled. He would follow the high ground beside the road, then cut through the woods before it dipped into an area that might be covered by water. The brown water seemed particularly to be avoided, more than the woods.

He was running along the roadway now. Here was the place to enter the woods. Everywhere he found the footing unsteady. He must be careful. Could such a storm open an underground river? He shivered. Limb tips swept against his face. With his hands groping in front of him, elbows extended, he ran on. Did he hear something following? Slackening his pace, he listened. He had imagined it. He had imagined the light illusion in the museum's room. He had probably imagined the noises in the tower . . . and those upstairs. He had imagined some connection between the Beast and Madame Renaud. What had been wrong with him? Had he really suspected he had created a Beast? Was he going mad? Did he really think a statue could have walked away? Something strange had taken hold of him. It was

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clear now; the physical effort of running had helped clear his mind.

He had not imagined what had taken place in the bedroom. The excitement of the storm and fancies had inflamed his mind, had tricked him. Why was he running? In the darkness of the woods, he struck a tree. It was like a slap in the face. He shook his head. He must have been temporarily out of his mind. He was lucky to get away. God knows what might have . . .

He had stopped running. What was that? Something had taken several strides after he stopped, then it had stopped too.

He took several careful steps, then began to run wildly. The footsteps followed. He could hear branches break beneath their tread. He stopped again. Yes, it took several more steps, then stopped too. It was closer now. He started off again in abject flight. It was like a nightmare. Suddenly, he hit another tree. There was a tremendous crushing sensation. For a long time it was dark. When he awakened, he could not move, then he saw two lights. Lanterns! Thank God! They were coming for him. He would be happy to be taken back to whatever charges he might have to face. He was grateful for having been pursued. Here! Here I am, he tried to call out.

The two lanterns swung in unison as the searchers approached. He heard their voices, but could not make out their words; they spoke in guttural tones. The lights were very close now. He could see the white flames and their red centers. He saw them clearly now. They were the eyes of the Beast.

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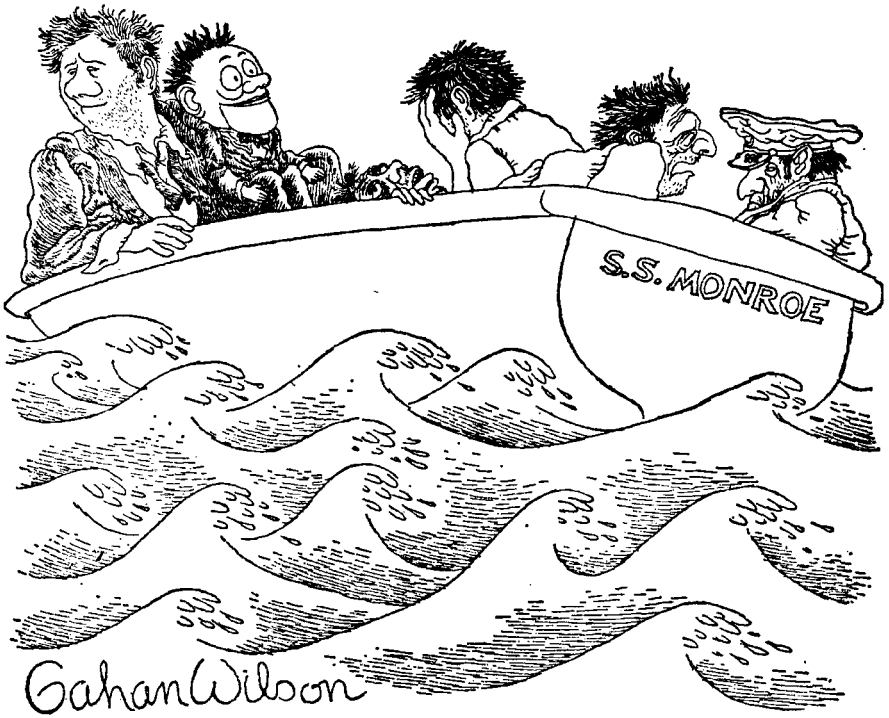

"I just don't understand it, Captain. Equal shares of food and water to all, yet those two thrive while we wither away."

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This strange and affecting story of a group of survivors at war with themselves and with the terrifying and beautiful creatures known as dragonflies was written by a young Londoner who is Books Editor for New Worlds. *He has been published in England, in* Science Fantasy, Ambit, New Writings in SF *and* New Worlds; *this is his first appearance in the U. S.*

LONDON MELANCHOLY

by M. John Harrison

We made it to London Melancholy at grim twilight. The derelict landscape: what buildings remained there loomed in a massive grey silence from empty pools of shadow and cold mist. Thin Molder folded his wings, sniffed, and said, "Because I am now the leader . . ." But he couldn't pull an order from his head, scratch it though he might and despite the wrinkled skin between his eyes, a sure sign that he was trying hard. So we laughed at him and he wasn't pleased. Only Malice didn't join in. He kept his face long and bleak.

Morag-Morag had missed an updraught the day before, and broken her neck on a bent radio mast at Hillmorten Hard-Edge. She was old, but a beautiful leader who thought deeply. We missed her immediately, hovering about her folded body shrouded in its pale broken wings. Her limbs had somehow become snared on the flaking metal spars two hundred feet from the ground. The wind handled her blonde hair, which was like gold wire against the rusty pylon; it stirred her wings constantly, so they alternately caught and lost a reflection of the grey sky; she hung there, dead. All of a sudden, there was nobody to tell us what to do. We didn't know what to do with her. Fay Glass, the mad girl, perched above her corpse, clinging to the mast and whispering, "In my youth I made my small contribution. Venice becomes like Blackpool, leaving nothing for anyone.

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Rebellion is good and necessary." Then she began to cry. We nodded to her; to a degree, sympathetic; but also wrapped in our own sadness. There was only one place for us after that.

"London-of-the-sorrows," said Malice Priest.

"London Misery," said Two Jane.

"London *Melancholy*," insisted Thin Molder, "And *I'm* the boss!"

So we named Hillmorten Hard-Edge and kicked away into the updraughts. Morag-M watched us away with blind eyes. The winds were blowing south. We met no dragonflies.

Two Jane has an instinct for domesticity. She found us a sixth-floor room well above the fog-layer. It had a bed (Thin Molder claimed it immediately, bounced on it, looked pleased) and several blankets, none of them very moldy. A fungus-stain crept across the north wall, shaped like a baby. It was cold, and there was a red carpet. It had been used before, but a long time since: somebody had scrawled KILROY *IS* HERE on the yellowed wallpaper, in pencil. The graphite was smudged and faded. A pile of empty tins in one corner, discarded bottles elsewhere, a ewer green inside with long-dead algae: Kilroy had been gone a year or more. We sat on the floor, waiting for Thin to direct us. Fay Glass stared out of the window at the mist-layer, which was faintly silver in the fading light. She sang; the same wordless line over and again.

"A foraging party," suggested Malice Priest.

"Shut up," said Molder, "*I* send the foraging parties out, not you."

"I'll go," I offered, to keep the peace. I like new places. There is something about a new building, somewhere you haven't been before. Something electric in the air. It never lasts, though.

"Take Fay with you, she's getting on my nerves," said Thin.

Fay, who is otherwise quite ugly, has amazing blonde eyes that are mostly vacant. But just then she came to the surface of them and smiled at me. They glowed. She comes out of her head, sometimes, to live in the real world for a while; not often. Nobody knows what locked her up like that in the bones of her own skull. "My party promises you a stable economy," she said. "Pacifism isn't going to win this war." She seemed to expect an answer, although you can never tell. I took her arm and said, "You could be right, Fay."

She could have been, at that.

"Get a move on," said Thin. He never had any patience with Fay. Unlike me, he was never black-magicked by her yellow eyes. His loss, that's all.

Outside the room ran a dim corridor with a ceiling-high mural

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of grey, fluffy mold on one wall—a mad, formless tapestry of shifting tones and vaguely suggestive shapes. It fascinated the mad girl. She stood in front of it, a small, introspective smile on her lips. (That smile, she reserved for the mist at dawn, the dry, gaudy husks of dead dragonflies, and once in a while for the cryptic tendernesses of her love-making.) She wanted to touch it and I had to pull her away. She murmured fractiously and thereafter kept stumbling because her eyes weren't on the business in hand.

She almost fell down the stairwell.

Wide parquet steps wound into the gloom of the mist, which filled the third floor, presenting a deceptively smooth face. Stray wisps of the stuff writhed up, stung our eyes and clawed at the membranes of our throats. We stared down for a moment, then made for the ground floor.

In dragonfly land, the mist was tinted oily yellow. Faintly luminescent, it heaved continually, a slow and ugly motion, like a heavy sea. We too moved slowly. Fay's eyes distended warily behind the perspex panes of her respirator; her body tensed beneath the tough, iridescent folds of a gas-cape made from dragonfly-wing. Behind us, she ran out a thin nylon umbilical cord from a spool that squeaked deafeningly in the undersea gloaming. I discovered my hands occupied more and more often with the grenades at my belt, finding a measure of cold reassurance in their hard fragmented surfaces. The blank face of the mist warped vision, destroying perspective and orientation. We collided frequently with walls and shadowy, decaying fixtures that seemed to loom up out of our own heads. And this in a deepwater-haunted silence that made us prey to internal specters, personal images of ground-floor fear.

But there were no dragonflies.

Kilroy or one of his predecessors had stripped the kitchen efficiently. Shelves like toothless gums grinned through vortices of mist. Thick nodules of mold on working-surfaces where perishables had been left. Rusty implements and peeling chrome fasciae. Fungoid growths made intricate spiral patterns, constructions as delicately poised as sanity in the shifting phosphorescence. We searched in silence. Finally, Fay whispered, "Best quality produce. This committee will ensure a steady rise in the general standard of living. Preservatives have been added." She had found two seven-pound cans of ham and a large square tin without a label. Kilroy's cache, stowed behind a disemboweled microwave cooker.

I gave her the high sign, and we left, following the umbilicus. There is something infinitely

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pleasant about knowing that the ground floor is behind you. The ascent from Hades, and no one has ever been known to look back.

In the room on the sixth, Thin Molder and Malice Priest were fighting it out. The racket was audible halfway down the corridor.

Two Jane was huddled up on the bed. Her clothes were undone and there was a bruise over her left eye. Molder and Priest were rolling about the floor, biting and elbowing each other inexpertly, and making animal noises. Priest got on top and gazed blankly at me, panting and sweating, his fingers anchored in Molder's throat. Blood ran into his eyes. There was a lull. Molder said something incoherent. There was a flurry of motion during which, more by accident than design, Priest caught a knee in the groin. He bellowed, staggered back, and grabbed at his laser. I should have stepped in at that point, but I didn't because Fay Glass was clutching my arm. Thin Molder screamed. I had to hit the mad girl to make her let go. I barked my shin on the end of the bed, dropped my tin of ham, and found that Priest had backed into a corner. Thin Molder was dead.

Priest was looking down at him with a mixture of surprise and triumph plucking at the muscles of his face. Slowly, his hand brought the laser to bear on me, of its own volition, it seemed, because *he* was still gazing at the corpse.

As if Morag-M's death wasn't enough.

"You can put it away now," I said. I was frightened. The two women had begun to chatter. The sound was hard and enameled, like the rattle of sparrows in a derelict warehouse. By the sound of it, neither could understand the other. Priest noticed me. He looked at me as if it were our first meeting, the flesh round his eyes crinkling up. He swallowed. A shudder passed through him. Then he said:

"Shut up. I'll cut you up—"

I had no standpoint from which to argue. You can't throw Mills bombs around in a twelve-by-twelve room.

Fading rose light picked out one side of Priest's face. His lower jaw had developed a disconcerting lateral twitch. I wondered whom the dim light would hamper most if I tried to jump him. He seemed to divine my thought-train, took a firmer grip on himself. He made a small, petulant gesture with the weapon. The room slid dizzily into total darkness.

For a lunatic moment, I thought Malice Priest had turned the sky off.

I bit my lips in blind confusion. Small noises about me, shiftings, creakings, and the whimper-

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ing of the women. Heat crawled in my palms. Then the window burst like a star shell, spraying glass in brittle, glittering arcs. Fragments spat and exploded against the walls.

Simultaneously, the light returned.

Framed by the pale rectangle of the casement, a monstrous triangular head thrust into the room. The last orange-drab of sunset lent it a partial aura. Beneath this dull halo, eye-clusters the size of melons glowed surly olive-green. A wedge-shaped snout, complicated by breathing apparatus. Viscid ochre liquid escaping the ebony carapace under the eyes. Outside, entopic limbs scraped at the sill for purchase. Overlaying the vision—buffering purely physical sensation—came the blunt, insistent head-pressure of meaningless insectile telepathies.

A dragonfly had come visiting.

Malice Priest had turned automatically to face it, but he wasn't doing anything: the laser drooped from his lax fingers, menacing nothing but the floor. He stood very still. His face was out of control, breaking up with fear. A two-inch splinter of glass hung out of his twitching cheek. Two feet away, the inscrutable head clicked and twittered and dwarfed him. Some sort of impasse seemed to have been reached: Priest was paralyzed, but the dragonfly couldn't get any further in. It redoubled its scraping at the sill. Wood-dust and splinters flew up.

I backed off to the bed, where Fay Glass was having a fit, her back arched improbably, her eyes protuberant and wild. A dark undertow of dragonfly consciousness tugged in my skull: slow, partly formed images smoked through my mind. The shadows in the corners of the room ate up the light and moved steadily outwards. Two Jane beckoned from the door, her fingers fluttering idiotically. Her head was moving rhythmically from side to side, as if her neck contained bent clockwork. Shadows interfered with my ability to make decisions. Fay kicked once and slumped, comatose. I shouldered the limp body and staggered out of the door. Two Jane, holding it open, seemed to have mastered the idiot mechanism of her neck. She now gazed rigidly ahead.

That corridor was beautiful. I had never seen a more beautiful thing; it was so calm and empty. Two Jane took the mad girl and made for the nearest window. I went back to get Priest.

The dragonfly had torn the casement frame out and pushed part of its thorax into the room. The splintered rectangle of wood hung crookedly from its armor. The dark viridescent eyes glowed within a foot of Priest's head. He was moaning, a low, animal ululation; there was blood all over his

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face, glinting dully. I saw quite clearly that nothing could make me go back into that place. A black forelimb squeezed itself through the window and plucked at the bloody figure. Its joints were leaking. Brick-work fell in on the red carpet. I slammed the door and vomited all over it.

We left through a window on the other side of the building. Overloaded by the weight of Fay's inert body, I was forced to swoop low over the pale, bland face of the mist. Struggling for height, I watched it glow gently in the wan light of a crescent moon.

At the heart of London Melancholy lay an immense flatland of mist. It was smooth and torpid and faceless—it made no statements and it expected no answers. Its moods were reflective, like the moods of the moon. In the mornings it stretched pink fingers to meet the dawn; pillars and faint suggestions of architecture arose; they failed to change its expression. At noon, the sun turned it incandescent as a tungsten filament. It scarred the eye. And when the days burned to death, the mist bled in sympathy. At no time did the mask assume the character of the face beneath: the ground floor remained a hidden yellow broth, stirred sluggishly by enigmatic currents and haunted by dragonfly images.

There was a rough crucifix sketched on the plain, its impalpable arms radiating from a central building to four charred shells that stood out of the mist like root-fragments from a white gum. The stumps—one merely a wall, fingering up a hundred feet entirely unsupported—rose four-faceted in tiers of black window-sockets, then terminated abruptly in thorn-tangles of bent and melted load-girders. At certain times of day, the sun would touch the glass of dead windows and let them live again, briefly and brightly.

Five blind buildings above the mist, dwarfed by the wreckage of a dragonfly ship a generation old.

The heart of London Melancholy was a scrap yard five miles square. Shattered hull plates curved up between the buildings, black and pitted monoliths fifty yards high, their outer faces still bearing the weathered traces of great meaningless ideographs. Festoons of cable hung from yawning concave surfaces, lending them a disturbingly organic aspect. This was heightened by the drab areas of vegetation that had taken root in pockets of airborne loess. It all contrasted violently with the hundred-foot smears of corrosion that crawled down the exposed metal. The ribs of the ship had been scattered from its spine upon impact. They cast scimitar-shadows: inching across the plain, these indicated the buildings, like the calibrations

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of a sundial. The backbone itself lay north-south, in three segments, which bucked in half-mile loops—the scenic railway of an idiot's dream—across the fog-layer. The buildings appeared to sink, to drown, surrounded by the fins of enormous sharks.

We lived in the central building for a week.

Fay Glass has gold threads in her wings. High up, where the alar tissue emerges from the sheaths of muscle overlaying her shoulder blades, the network is simple: three thick arterial branches, tawny, throbbing rhythmically as they draw blood from her system. But toward the blunt, broad wingtips the filigree becomes steadily more complex, its color inclining from red-brown to pale yellow. Possibly it is some trick of the light—the blood is quite normally colored, quite human—but the fine transparency of wing is like crystal inlaid with gold. It is very beautiful. On the afternoon of the eighth day, I lay on the floor, watching her flash like a great jewel as she moved. Light burned up from the mist. I was pleasantly stupified by the heat.

"BLOW YOUR MIND, GABRIEL ROSSETTI," said Fay. She was reading the graffiti that covered the north wall. It was a huge sun-illumined manuscript: scrawled injunctions in a variety of scripts and media: obscenities in pencil and burnt-stick, invitations in white chalk, a banner headline from a surrealist's internal newspaper in bright red paint. Over two generations, the drab whitewash had become a vulgar palimpsest, each inscription overlaid by another.

"IS THERE LIFE *BEFORE* DEATH?" said Fay. There wasn't very much to do. We had dragged in two beds from an adjoining room, giving the place a marginally permanent air. Two Jane was sewing something in a corner, a sheet or something. It was mildewed, dull grey and green. It had been an uneventful week, almost as if Morag-M were back with us.

"THERE YOU GO," said Fay. She turned away and flung herself on one of the beds. Her lips petulant, she began to pick handfuls of flock from the ancient mattress. Two Jane dropped whatever it was she was doing and told her not to be silly. Fay sulked. The heat was enervating, like a great weight on my chest. I dozed off and killed dragonflies in my sleep.

"I can hear something," hissed Two Jane. She was shaking my shoulder, trying to penetrate a web of dream and an apocalyptic headache. "Wake up for God's sake." I managed to reorient, struggling to dispel the last of the oneiric images. The light had

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turned brown: it was early evening, but the heat didn't seem to have abated. Dust motes toppled and swung in oblique bars of dull-copper sunlight. I put my ear to the floor, because it made a very efficient sounding board. The room below us had been used as storage space: it took up most of the fourth story, and it was empty. I heard a faint scraping noise, an irregular rustle. Two Jane thrust her face close to mine, her mouth dragged down with anxiety at the corners.

"What are we going to do?"

"Go and see," I said. I let my mind go blank and receptive, testing the emotional atmosphere for the taint of dragonfly. It was there; faintly, I felt that characteristic distortion of perception, saw the universe briefly bent through ninety degrees; but it was weak and diffused, like distant madness. I got to my feet and unhooked the remaining Mills bomb from my belt, wishing I had used the others less haphazardly.

The door of the storeroom was scarred and covered with unintelligible chalk-marks. The noise had become much louder. It rose and fell in time with the waves of head-pressure that were beginning to affect us. Fay Glass was staring frantically about like a small distressed bird, her eyes unpleasantly alive. She started to bite her fingernails, yelping as one tore to the quick. "Stop it!" hissed Two Jane, and slapped her hand. I kicked the door open and took a couple of steps into the room.

The dragonfly crouched on the far side of the room, across a dusty and sun-specked floor. In the warm, tawny light, it was heraldic: strange and beautiful, the dark green exoskeleton glowed richly, like oiled metal; the wings, quivering slightly were shot with silver where Fay's are gold. Thorax and belly were decorated with arabesque chasing and complex chrome-yellow symbols, like the ideographs on the shattered hull sections outside. (It is difficult to tell whether these are merely natural markings or the artificial emblems of caste and identity—the armorial bearings of some dragonfly Chivalry.) Exaggerated eye-lobes caught the light like globes of rough obsidian. For an instant I found the thing more bizarre than threatening, as if the heat-dreams had not yet left my head.

It was sick.

Splayed and buckled, its limbs twitched, their joints excreting thick gouts of ochre fluid. There were laser burns on its carapace, a deep aimless cross-hatching, and its breathing apparatus was missing. Chittering drowsily to itself, it ignored me. Faint telepathic projections: a formless irritation at the periphery of consciousness. Occasionally, it scrabbled weak forelimbs against the floor, creating pointless patterns in the dust.

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The burns weren't critical; prolonged exposure to the atmosphere was; its viscera were dissolving.

I began to back out of the room. The beast was as good as dead.

Fay Glass stepped in front of me.

She walked into the middle of the room, faltered, stopped. She gazed at the dragonfly, her eyes curiously lambent, her lips moving silently. The dragonfly became stone-still, a sculpture in green and gold, impassive. Expecting another fit, I laid a hand on her upper arm. She ignored it: slim and still, she stared at the dying insect. The obsidian globes glinted dully. It renewed the scraping of its forelimbs. Fay Glass moved forward, her head tilted to one side. I gripped her shoulder. She shook off my hand, impatiently but impersonally: I had the strange sensation that I no longer existed for her.

The head-pressure increased.

They confronted for thirty seconds, mad girl and dragonfly: a thin mousy wraith with beautiful eyes planted in a sort of stiff homage before a wild heraldic sculpture. Her face was devoid of expression, but her eyes were luminous, energized.

"We do not want to be here," she said. I got the impression that it wasn't Fay speaking at all.

"We did not ask to be sent here, we had no choice. We are dying but they keep sending ships. This place is unsuitable, but there is no way of telling them to stop. Our atmosphere installations are inefficient, we are drowning in your air. We are not breeding, the race is dying: shipload after shipload are dying sterile. It cannot go on."

The dragonfly had become quiescent. Fay had backed up until the great eye-clusters were hidden by her body. She might have been touching the thing.

"They told us this world was empty. We did not come expecting this. Stop fighting. Go away and wait. The ships will stop coming eventually. There are few enough of you left. Go away and wait, we are dying anyway—"

Her face lost its rigidity. She cocked her head again, a puzzled little *moue* tightening her lips. Her eyes flickered about uncertainly. Then she said:

"We are dyingdyingdying, we. Are dying, we. Are: we dying. I? The government has announced that severe measures, rumored to take the form of economic reprisal, are dying, help. The Soviet ambassador said: 'We need. We—' "

She began to weep.

The dragonfly scrabbled, chittering and leaking. Wings thrashing impotently, it looked like a jeweled machine, out of control. Fay was convulsed. Her eyes psychotic, she ran aimlessly about, screaming "Help us!" I grabbed at

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her, bundled her out of the door, fighting the sick fascination of the insect metabolism. She stared into my face with inhuman anguish crumbling her features, yelled "Please!" as if the Pit had opened in her head.

I pulled the pin and lobbed the bomb underhand. It bounced, rolled innocuously across the sunny floor, vanished under the threshing insect. A last glance at the dislocated machinery of waving limbs, the abdomen curling until tail touched mandibles. Viridescent eyes burned at me. Then I slammed the door on the vision and flattened both of us against the wall. A dull, gigantic cough. The building shook. A mammoth hand shoved the door off its hinges from inside, turned it to matchwood, which pattered against the opposing wall. Dust and smoke and splinters bellied out in a violent brown cloud. The mad girl *screamed.* She gabbled nonsense.

"Shut *up,* damn you!" I shouted. For a moment, I heard Thin Molder's petulant, insensitive ghost in my voice. But I didn't feel too bad about it.

Fay Glass always has talked rubbish.

Out among the scattered bones of the dragonfly ship, two dark figures planed over the eye-searing quicksilver mirror of the mist, their tiny shadows racing before them across the rearing hull-surfaces. Catching a thermal, they gyred upward, doubling their height in seconds. Quick sparks of light as the sun caught spread wings. Heat struck up at me like a mailed fist as I watched from a window a hundred feet above. Behind me in the corridor, the dust and smoke were settling slowly. A fragment of dragonfly carapace like blued steel had stuck in the window frame. The building was quiet, and I could detect no dragonflies: the dead insect's distress had gone unheeded. After a final check, I dropped into the white-hot turbulent air.

It was like flying into a wall. The airstream tore and battered at me, and it might have come from the mouth of a furnace. I found an updraught almost immediately. Locating Two Jane and Fay, I climbed in rapid spirals and, having got well above them, dipped a wing. The resultant sideslip put me on a collision vector. I shot through Jane's slipstream and pulled a muscle in an attempt to match speeds. More enthusiasm than sense. "Stupid," she said, and I didn't know whether she meant me or Fay. The mad girl was goofing about, allowing her speed to drop to stalling-point, then catching herself on the verge of a fall. Each time it happened she laughed delightedly. She seemed to have returned to normal.

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We perched high up on one of the hull plates.

A warm wind bumbled about us—creaking in a sheaf of rusty cables—as we stood on the ledge created by a stringer ten feet wide.

"What now?" asked Two Jane, her eyes never leaving Fay, who was talking to a sick little flower sprouting from a patch of dust.

"We leave," I said. Fay's idiotic speech had made me uncomfortable. I wanted to be somewhere where I could forget it. Fay herself was reminder enough: she had abandoned the flower to its own devices and was sitting at the edge of the stringer, dangling her feet over an incredible drop, dabbling her fingers in a pool of rusty rainwater. A great black arc of steel yawned up behind her. That and the drooping moss of corroded cable. It was all a threat —hard metal, steel vegetation, and the long drop into the mist.

"Come away from there," said Two Jane.

"It's quieter in the north," I said. "I don't know why we came here."

Fay had returned to the flower. Preoccupied, I watched vaguely as her thin quick hands flickered about the pale yellow bloom. She was very gentle with it. They shared a wan beauty, she and the flower, and an identically precarious existence.

"We'll try the midlands again for a while. But I want to go north. Way up."

Fay yelped abruptly and danced backwards. She was licking her hands, waving them about. There were tears on her cheeks.

The flower had become a charred little heap, black ashes already beginning to stir gently in the warm wind. A thin white line crept down the dark alien metal, smoking and fading through ochre to dull orange, then red. A curious smell, hot and bitter. Two Jane was huddled over the mad girl's burnt hands. Fay whimpered. Suddenly unable to move, I watched the laser beam cut a second groove across the hull plate less than a foot from my head. It was lightning-jagged this time, as if the hand that held the gun was trembling.

Two Jane, staring over my shoulder with big eyes, yelled something incoherent, pointed.

I took a few steps forward, leapt, slammed into her left side. The impact jarred every bone in my body. She tottered, screamed, grabbed at the mad girl for support. Wailing, both of them fell off the edge of the stringer. The bodies diminished in size, tumbling over and over as they fell. I caught a flash of silver as spread wings clawed at the air. The long cry faded. Satisfied that they were safely out of the way, I turned to face Malice Priest.

He stood, swaying, fifteen yards

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away, feet planted wide apart, the laser clutched black and cumbersome in scarred grey fists. His clothes hung off him in flapping tatterdemalion strips. His left cheek was a purple and yellow smear of necrosis and puss, stiff and distended. (As if to compensate for this partial immobility, the rest of his face twitched constantly, charting strange, ephemeral continents of emotion.) Out of the ruin, his one good eye burned bright and fixated. He stank. Raising the weapon to cover me, he began to move forward, his gait rolling and unsteady. When he had come within speaking distance, I said, "It's me. You can stop shooting now. Jane will take care of you—"

The smashed face was hideous, the single eye a window on nothing I could interpret. His mouth had got somehow lost in a mass of puffy, suppurating tissue. The gangrened areas looked like fungus flesh, lurid, and deceptively firm. He didn't lower the gun, merely made an odd, torn little sound, conveying pain. The effort involved in squeezing it past those corpse's lips left us trembling.

"No," I said, "you're all right now. We'll look after you."

He found a voice. The words emerged distorted, blurred at the edges by the corpse-hole in his face: "Shot it, the dragonfly. You left me. I'm all on fire. I'll cut you up, you'll burn."

I dropped flat, abandoning reason in favor of reflex, as his fingers tightened convulsively. The heat discharge scorched across my scalp. The ledge was warm and gritty to the touch; it terminated half an inch from my outflung hand. Priest continued to gaze through the space where I had stood, blinking his sound eyelid slowly. The laser trembled.

"I'm the boss," he said. "I send the foraging parties out."

He looked down at me.

I suppose I should have fought him for the laser; he was tired and ill, but I couldn't bear the thought of that shattered, reeking face pressed up close to mine. His fingers twitched again. I rolled off the ledge, my clothes smoldering where the beam had caught me. The pain was excruciating.

Almost pleasant, this long free fall: I drifted, exploring the pain. It centered in my side; the air bit at it with sharp needle-teeth. I flexed various muscles. The left alar surface was dragging, responding fractionally slower than the other on each stroke. Priest had come near to clipping my wings. There was plenty of time to check: cradled in euphoria, I floated, not caring very much. Nothing seemed to be badly damaged. I fell some more. Became aware of two figures falling with me. Underwater posturings. They gesticulated, making mouth-noises

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that were immediately whipped away by the airstream. I laughed merrily. My speed had built up to the point where I had to pull out or plummet into the mist. Or strip a wing. Stupid, I thought. More enthusiasm than sense . . .

Shock-happy, I braked hard. The agony of setting the damaged wing against the kiln-wall of the air wrenched me sharply out of it. Two Jane and Fay Glass flanked me as I bulleted over the mist.

"Move it!" I yelled. "Get some height—!"

The black iota hunting out of the golden sky was Priest: a ragged falcon, and we the sparrows. Superheated air eddied around us as the laser beam fingered out. We hit a thermal turbulence boiling up from a dark tangle of wreckage, gyred up, began to lose speed. Priest shot past us twenty feet away, squawking like a black gull. I recalled the eastern seaboard and the harsh, high-speed squabbling of seafowl above the corroded skeletons of offshore oil rigs. He banked, spun and pulled up short, his wrecked body impressively controlled.

The updraught increased as we maneuvered over the sharkfin of the hull plate. Our climbing-spiral tightened with the corresponding acceleration. I took a hurried look back. Priest, having lost the advantage of height, was cruising about at mist-zero, firing the laser in five second bursts. His aim had become erratic. As I watched, he began to climb doggedly after us.

A lull. We struggled for height, ignoring each other.

Fay Glass is rarely happy with concrete beneath her feet, but in the air—that is something else. The swift-shifting currents are her milieu, the bright windrift. She was laughing when the heat-beam hit her. Two thousand feet above the mist, she shouted in a peculiar guttural voice and fell like a bundle of brown rags, spinning. Her wings glittered uselessly. There was a glowing coal among the rags, then a bright bloom of flame.

I caught her.

She cartwheeled down, an incendiary puppet, and I *caught* her.

Mist and lunatic sky looped improbably, crashed and spun together. Bells in my head. The impact plucked me out of the updraught like a hand taking a fly; knocked me down, down, toward the bright rocking floor. Fighting her flailing limbs, disoriented, I rested the weight of both of us on my damaged wings. It hurt. We lost two hundred feet clear, accelerating and hopeless, before they bit, scooped, and hung like bleeding finger-ends from the parapet of the air. Slowing so slowly: half a mile slipping past and Fay (quiescent now, all her bright flames dead) mewling in my ear, indistinguishable from

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the complaint of the laminar flow. I held steady at a thousand, clawing feverishly, wings singing like a distant dragonfly on a drowsy afternoon.

Which was no comfort at all because my beaten muscles weren't good any more for climbing, and Priest was breathing down my neck. He hovered, his death mask expressing nothing. The laser his sting. Two Jane could have been away and free, but she circled down and stared mutely at the mad girl's blackened clothing, at Priest's empty face. We hung in a desperate stasis. There was nowhere to go: if I dropped once more, it would be into the mist, and forever.

"I'm the boss," said Priest.

He pointed the laser. The mad girl murmured painfully. Something meaningless.

"Leave us alone," said Two Jane. "Why can't you?"

But Priest was imprisoned inside the bones of his own skull, and he didn't hear. His good eye blinked rapidly. He pressed the firing stud.

The world exploded. I fell about in a mad turbulence, clinging to Fay Glass as if her limp body might save us both.

A dragonfly ship falling out of the sun.

Its frontal pressure-wave hurled us a mile into the wild sky. Breath stolen by termagant vortices, we tumbled in the grip of a massive updraught, falling upwards. Priest was whisked away, his limbs jerking helplessly, still clutching the laser. Two Jane cried out in a thin loud voice, her hair tangled round her face. My arms cracked under the weight of the mad girl. With wind-streaming eyes, I watched the enormous black hull slide beneath us like a fish in deep water, its mammoth shadow obscuring the shattered buildings. The air shuddered in its wake.

It hit the ground like a bomb, and fell to pieces.

Plumes of mist boiled up, filing our throats raw. Wreckage scattered over the face of London Melancholy: girders toppling end over end, miles of conduit exploding away like burst viscera, hull plates the size of houses. A second shock wave kicked us another thousand yards nearer the sun. Fay woke up and began to scream. Minor concussions flayed the surface of the mist; light flared as isolated bits of wreckage exploded; larger sections rang like immense bells as they fell, demolishing those buildings that remained above the mist. A rolling brown fog of dust and debris enveloped me.

Abruptly, we entered a pocket of calmer air. Two Jane looked through the wreaths of mist, choking. She spun, steadied herself, came close. Over her shoulder I could see Malice Priest zeroing in again.

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"I'm the leader!" he was shouting. The laser fingered out, its beam a vague glowing line of hot dust-motes. Heat crawled across my temples. The Pit below and a madman above. I was tiring rapidly; the mere act of maintaining height had become painful. I was about to dive out and away despite the consequences, when Jane held out her arms.

"Give her to me. I can make it," she said. A pause. I stared at her foolishly. "Quick! You want to be cut to shreds?" I might have argued the point, but just then a rising hum cut through the murk, and I felt a familiar lurch of reality. A montage of incoherent images crept about my head.

Down below, the dragonflies were leaving the wreck.

Priest was past realizing the danger. He stayed where he was, waving his free arm and firing off the laser at random. "I'm the boss," he called.

Huddled among the bent girders of a broken tower at the edge of the central plain, we watched them take him. The starship lay like a ruined eye, an immense split fruit, mist swirling about it as it settled into the earth. The ideographs on its hull fluoresced in the fading light, speaking of incredible journeys. Two or three miles beyond the main body of wreckage something blew up, the flat concussion muffled by the mist. The dragonflies: at first, they were nothing more than a thin, hesitant line ascending from the ruins, etched against the sky like a wisp of black smoke. But the wisp became a plume, and the plume a great writhing mushroom cloud, humming and moaning, rising with slow deliberation until the air was dark with them.

And above, a tiny frantic mote, fighting for height.

A mesh of laser beams ignited the airborne dust in a brief splash of light. Then the periphery of the swarm engulfed him. They fastened on him: a darker speck coalesced, umbra within penumbra. Slowly there grew a well-defined black sphere, a globe of hunger, with Priest as its nucleus. And as it swelled, it began to sink through the ascending cloud, back toward the wreck.

"Oh God, they're horrible." Two Jane put her face between her hands.

But they were already beginning to die in the alien air of Earth.

"I don't know," I said. "Not any more. Priest was no loss. I just don't know."

Fay Glass opened her blonde eyes and looked straight into my head.

She smiled and whispered, "Such a long way. And so many wings."◀

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Mrs. Elgin writes: "I'm 32, married, have four children, and am working on my Ph. D. in Linguistics at the Univ. of California, San Diego, where I am a Graduate Assistant in French. I won the Academy of American Poets Award at the University of Chicago in 1955 and have had quite a bit of poetry published. I also work as a folksinger/guitarist, have taught guitar on TV, and have had songs published here and there . . . still find it hard to believe I've actually sold something that doesn't rhyme." Mrs. Elgin's first published prose is about a strange poet-led, rigidly structured society, and it's an impressively disciplined and involving story.

FOR THE SAKE OF GRACE

by Suzette Haden Elgin

THE KHADILH BAN-HARIHN frowned at the disk he held in his hand, annoyed and apprehensive. There was always, of course, the chance of malfunction in the com-system. He reached forward and punched the transmit button again with one thumb, and the machine clicked to itself fitfully and delivered another disk in the message tray. He picked it up, looked at it and swore a round assortment of colorful oaths, since no women were present.

There on the left was the matrix-mark that identified his family, the ban-harihn symbol quite clear; no possibility of error there. And from it curled the suitable number of small lines, yellow for the females, green for the males, one for each member of his household, all decorously in order. Except for one.

The yellow line that represented at all times the state of being of his wife, the Khadilha Althea, was definitely not as it should have been. It was interrupted at quarter-inch intervals by a small black dot, indicating that all was not well with the Khadilha. And the symbol at the end of the line was not the blue cross that would have classified the difficulty as purely physical; it was the inde-

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terminate red star indicating only that the problem, whatever it was, could be looked upon as serious or about to become serious.

The Khadilh sighed. That could mean anything, from his wife's misuse of their credit cards through a security leak by one of her servants to an unsuitable love affair—although his own knowledge of the Khadilha's chilly nature made him consider the last highly unlikely. The only possible course for him was to ask for an immediate full report.

And just what, he wondered, would he do, if the report were to make it clear that he was needed at home at once? One did not simply pick up one's gear and tootle off home from the outposts of the Federation. It would take him at the very least nine months to arrive in his home city-cluster, even if he were able to command a priority flight with suspended-animation berths and warp facilities. Damn the woman anyway, what could she be up to?

He punched the button for voice transmittal, and the com-system began to hum at him, indicating readiness for dialing. He dialed, carefully selecting the planet code, since his last attempt to contact his home, on his wife's birthday, had resulted in a most embarrassing conversation with a squirmy-tentacled creature that he had gotten out of its (presumed) bed in the middle of its (presumed) sleep. And he'd had to pay in full for the call, too, all intergalactic communication being on a buyer-risk basis.

". . . three-three-two-three-two . . ." he finished, very cautiously, and waited. The tiny screen lit up, and the words STAND BY appeared, to be replaced in a few seconds by SCRIBE (FEMALE) OF THE HOUSEHOLD BAN-HARIHN, which meant he had at least dialed correctly. The screen cleared and the words were replaced by the face of his household scribe, so distorted by distance as to be only by courtesy a face, but with the ban-harihn matrix-mark superimposed in green and yellow across the screen as security.

He spoke quickly, mindful of the com-rates at this distance.

"Scribe ban-harihn, this morning the state-of-being disk indicated some difficulty in the condition of the Khadilha Althea. Please advise if this condition could be described as an emergency."

After the usual brief lag for conversion to symbols, the reply was superimposed over the matrix-mark, and the Khadilh thought as usual that these tiny intergalactic screens became so cluttered before a conversation was terminated that one could hardly make out the messages involved.

The message in this case was "Negative", and the Khadilh

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smiled; the scribe was even more mindful than he of the cost of this transmittal.

He pushed the erase button and finished with, "Thank you, Scribe ban-harihn. You will then prepare at once a written report, in detail, and forward it to me by the fastest available means. Should the problem intensify to emergency point, I now authorize a com-system transmittal to that effect, to be initiated by any one of my sons. Terminate."

The screen went blank and the Khadilh, just for curiosity, punched one more time the state-of-being control. The machine delivered another disk, and sure enough, there it was again, black dots, red star and all. He threw it into the disposal, shrugged his shoulders helplessly and ordered coffee. There was nothing whatever that he could do until he received the scribe's report.

However, if it should turn out that he had wasted the cost of an intergalactic transmittal on some petty household dispute, there was going to be hell to pay, he promised himself, and a suitable punishment administered to the Khadilha by the nearest official of the Women's Discipline Unit. There certainly ought to be some way to make the state-of-being codes a bit more detailed so that everything from war to an argument with a servingwoman didn't come across on the same symbol.

The report arrived by Telebounce in four days. Very wise choice, he thought approvingly, since the Bounce machinery was totally automatic and impersonal. It was somewhat difficult to read, since the scribe had specified that it was to be delivered to him without transcription other than into verbal symbols, and it was therefore necessary for him to scan a roll of yellow paper with a message eight symbols wide and seemingly miles long. He read only enough to convince him that no problem of discretion could possibly be involved, and then he ran the thing through the transcribe slot, receiving a standard letter on white paper in return.

"To the Khadilh ban-harihn" it read, "as requested, the following report from the Scribe of his household:

"Three days ago, as the Khadilh is no doubt aware, the festival of the Spring Rains was celebrated here. The entire household, with the exception of the Khadilh himself, was present at a very large and elaborate procession held to mark the opening of the Alahari-bahan-khalida Trance Hours. A suitable spot for watching the procession, entirely in accordance with decorum, had been chosen by the Khadilha Althea, and the women of the household were standing in the second row along the edge of the street set aside for the women.

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"There had been a number of dancers, bands, and so on, followed by thirteen of the Poets of this city-cluster. The Poets had almost passed, along with the usual complement of exotic animals and mobile flowers and the like, and no untoward incident of any kind had occurred, when quite suddenly the Khadilh's daughter Jacinth was approached by (pardon my liberty of speech) the Poet Anna-Mary, who is, as the Khadilh knows, a female. The Poet leaned from her mount, indicating with her staff of bells that it was her wish to speak to the Khadilh's daughter, and halting the procession to do so. It was at this point that the incident occurred which has no doubt given rise to the variant marking in the state-of-being disk line for the Khadilha Althea. Quite unaccountably, the Khadilha, rather than sending the child forward to speak with the Poet (as would have been proper), grabbed the child Jacinth by the shoulders, whirling her around and covering her completely with her heavy robes so that she could neither speak nor see.

"The Poet Anna-Mary merely bowed from her horse and signaled for the procession to continue, but she was quite white and obviously offended. The family made a show of participating in the rest of the day's observances, but the Khadilh's sons took the entire household home by mid-afternoon, thereby preventing the Khadilha from participating in the Trance Hours. This was no doubt a wise course.

"What sequel there may have been to this, the Scribe does not know, as no announcement has been made to the household. The Scribe here indicates her respect and subservience to the Khadilh.

"Terminate with thanks."

"Well!" said the Khadilh. He laid the letter down on the top of his desk, thinking hard, rubbing his beard with one hand.

What could reasonably be expected in the way of repercussions from a public insult to an elderly—and touchy—Poet? It was hard to say.

As the only female Poet on the planet, the Poet Anna-Mary was much alone; as her duties were not arduous, she had much time to brood. And though she was a Poet, she remained only a female, with the female's inferior reasoning powers. She was accustomed to reverent homage, to women holding up their children to touch the hem of her robe. She could hardly be expected to react with pleasure to an insult in public, and from a female.

It was at his sons that she would be most likely to strike, through the University, he decided, and he could not chance that. He had worked too hard, and they had worked too hard, to

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allow a vindictive female, no matter how lofty her status, to destroy what they had built up. He had better go home and leave the orchards to take care of themselves; important as the lush peaches of Earth were to the economy of his home planet, his sons were of even greater importance.

It was not every family that could boast of five sons in the University, all five selected by competitive examination for the Major in Poetry. Sometimes a family might have two sons chosen, but the rest would be refused, as the Khadilh himself had been refused, and would then have to be satisfied with the selection of Law or Medicine or Government or some other of the Majors. He smiled proudly, remembering the respectful glances of his friends when each of his sons in turn had placed high in the examinations and been awarded the Poet Major, his oldest son entering at the Fourth Level. And when the youngest had been chosen, thus releasing the oldest from the customary vow of celibacy—since to impose it would have meant the end of the family line, an impossible situation—the Khadilh had had difficulty in maintaining even a pretense of modesty. The meaning, of course, was that he would have as grandson the direct offspring of a Poet, something that had not happened within his memory or his father's memory. He had been given to understand, in fact, that it had been more than three hundred years since all sons of any one family had entered the Poetry courses. (A family having only one son was prohibited by law from entering him in the Poetry Examinations, they told him.)

Yes, he must go home, and the hell with the peaches of Earth. Let them rot, if the garden-robots could not manage them.

He went to the com-system and punched through a curt transmittal of his intention, and then set to pulling the necessary strings to obtain a priority flight.

When the Khadilh arrived at his home, his sons were lined up in his study, waiting for him, each in the coarse brown student's tunic that was compulsory, but with the scarlet Poet's stripe around the hem to delight his eyes. He smiled at them, saying, "It is a pleasure to see you once more, my sons; you give rest to my eyes and joy to my heart."

Michael, the oldest, answered in kind.

"It is our pleasure to see you, Father."

"Let us all sit down," said the Khadilh, motioning them to their places about the study table that stood in the center of the room. When they were seated, he struck the table with his knuckles, in the old ritual, three times slowly.

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"No doubt you know why I have chosen to abandon my orchards to the attention of the garden-robots and return home so suddenly," he said. "Unfortunately, it has taken me almost ten months to reach you. There was no more rapid way to get home to you, much as I wished for one."

"We understand, Father," said his oldest son.

"Then, Michael," went on the Khadilh, "would you please bring me up to date on the developments here since the incident at the procession of the Spring Rains.

His son seemed hesitant to speak, his black brows drawn together over his eyes, and the Khadilh smiled at him encouragingly.

"Come, Michael," he said, "surely it is not courteous to make your father wait in this fashion!"

"You will realize, Father," said the young man slowly, "that it has not been possible to communicate with you since the time of your last transmittal. You will also realize that this matter has not been one about which advice could easily be requested. I have had no choice but to make decisions as best I could."

"I realize that. Of course."

"Very well, then. I hope you will not be angry, Father."

"I shall indeed be angry if I am not told at once exactly what has occurred this past ten months. You make me uneasy, my son."

Michael took a deep breath and nodded. "All right, Father," he said. "I will be brief."

"And quick."

"Yes, Father. I took our household away from the festival as soon as I decently could without creating talk; and when we arrived at home, I sent the Khadilha at once to her quarters, with orders to stay there until you should advise me to the contrary."

"Quite right," said the Khadilh. "Then what?"

"The Khadilha disobeyed me, Father."

"Disobeyed you? In what way?"

"The Khadilha Althea disregarded my orders entirely, and she took our sister into the Small Corridor, and there she allowed her to look into the cell where our aunt is kept, Father."

"My God!" shouted the Khadilh. "And you made no move to stop her?"

"Father," said Michael banharihn, "you must realize that no one could have anticipated the actions of the Khadilha Althea. We would certainly have stopped her had we known, but who would have thought that the Khadilha would disobey the order of an adult male? It was assumed that she would go to her quarters and remain there."

"I see."

"I did not contact the Women's

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Discipline Unit," Michael continued. "I preferred that such an order should come from you, Father. However, orders were given that the Khadilha should be restricted to her quarters, and no one has been allowed to see her except the servingwomen. The wires to her com-system were disconnected, and provision was made for suitable medication to be added to her diet. You will find her very docile, Father."

The Khadilh was trembling with indignation.

"Discipline will be provided at once, my son," he said. "I apologize for the disgusting behavior of the Khadilha. But please go on—what of my daughter?"

"That is perhaps the most distressing thing of all."

"In what way?"

Michael looked thoroughly miserable.

"Answer me at once," snapped the Khadilh, "and in full."

"Our sister Jacinth," said his second son, Nicolas, "was already twelve years of age at the time of the festival. When she returned from the Small Corridor, without notice to any one of us, she announced her intention by letter to the Poet Anna-Mary—her intention to compete in the examinations for the Major of Poetry."

"And the Poet Anna-Mary—"

"Turned the announcement immediately over to the authorities at the Poetry Unit," finished Michael. "Certainly she made no attempt to dissuade our sister."

"She is amply revenged then for the insult of the Khadilha," said the Khadilh bitterly. "Were there any other acts on the part of the Poet Anna-Mary?"

"None, Father. Our sister has been cloistered by government order since that time, of course, to prevent contamination of the other females."

"Oh, dear God," breathed the Khadilh, "how could such a thing have touched my household—for the second time?"

He thought a moment. "When are the examinations, then? I've lost all track of time."

"It has been ten months, Father."

"In about a month, then?"

"In three weeks."

"Will they let me see Jacinth?"

"No, Father," said Michael. "And Father—"

"Yes, Michael?"

"It is my shame and my sorrow that this should have been the result of your leaving your household in my care."

The Khadilh reached over and grasped his hand firmly.

"You are very young, my son," he said, "and you have nothing to be ashamed of. When the females of a household take it upon themselves to upset the natural order of things and to violate the rules of decency, there is very little anyone can do."

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"Thank you, Father."

"Now," said the Khadilh, turning to face them all, "I suggest that the next thing to do would be to initiate action by the Women's Discipline Unit. Do you wish me to have the Khadilha placed on Permanent Medication, my sons?"

He hoped they would not insist upon it, and was pleased to see that they did not.

"Let us wait, Father," said Michael, "until we know the outcome of the examinations."

"Surely the outcome is something about which there can be no question!"

"Could we wait, Father, all the same?"

It was the youngest of the boys. As was natural, he was still overly squeamish, still a bit tender. The Khadilh would not have had him be otherwise.

"A wise decision," he said. "In that case, once I have bathed and had my dinner, I will send for the Lawyer an-ahda. And you may go, my sons."

The boys filed out, led by the solemn Michael, leaving him with no company but the slow dance of a mobile flower from one of the tropical stars. It whirled gently in the middle of the corner hearth, humming to itself and giving off showers of silver sparks from time to time. He watched it suspiciously for a moment, and then pushed the com-system buttons for his Housekeeper. When the face appeared on the screen he snapped at it.

"Housekeeper, are you familiar with the nature of the mobile plant that someone has put in my study?"

The Housekeeper's voice, frightened, came back at once. "The Khadilh may have the plant removed—should I call the Gardener?"

"All I want to know is the sex of the blasted thing," he bellowed at her. "Is it male or female?"

"Male, Khadilh, of the genus—"

He cut off the message while she was still telling him of the plant's pedigree. It was male; therefore it could stay. He would talk to it, while he ate his dinner, about the incredible behavior of his Khadilha.

The Lawyer an-ahda leaned back in the chair provided for him and smiled at his client.

"Yes, ban-harihn," he said amiably, having known the Khadilh since they were young men at the University, "what can I do to help the sun shine more brightly through your window?"

"This is a serious matter," said the Khadilh.

"Ah."

"You heard—never mind being polite and denying it—of my wife's behavior at the procession of the Spring Rains. I see that you did."

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"Very impulsive," observed the Lawyer. "Most unwise. Undisciplined."

"Indeed it was. However, worse followed."

"Oh? The Poet Anna-Mary has tried for revenge, then?"

"Not in the sense that you mean, no. But worse has happened, my old friend, far worse."

"Tell me." The Lawyer leaned forward attentively, listening, and when the Khadilh had finished, he cleared his throat.

"There isn't anything to be done, you know," he said. "You might as well know it at once."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing. The law provides that any woman may challenge and claim her right to compete in the Poetry Examinations, provided she is twelve years of age and a citizen of this planet. If she is not accepted, however, the penalty for having challenged and failed is solitary confinement for life, in the household of her family. And once she has announced to the Faculty by signed communication that she intends to compete, she is cloistered until the day of the examinations, and she may not change her mind. The law is very clear on this point."

"She is very young."

"She is twelve. That is all the law requires."

"It's a cruel law."

"Not at all! Can you imagine, ban-harihn, the chaos that would result if every emotional young female, bored with awaiting marriage in the women's quarters, should decide that she had a vocation and claim her right to challenge? The purpose of the law is to discourage foolish young girls from creating difficulties for their households, and for the state. Can you just imagine, if there were only a token penalty, and chaperons had to be provided by the Faculty, and separate quarters provided, and—"

"Yes, I suppose I see! But why should women be allowed to compete at all? No such idiocy is allowed in the other Professions."

"The law provides that since the Profession of Poetry is a religious office, there must be a channel provided for the rare occasion when the Creator might see fit to call a female to His service."

"What nonsense!"

"There is the Poet Anna-Mary, ban-harihn."

"And how many others?"

"She is the third."

"In nearly nine thousand years! Only three in so many centuries, and yet no exception can be made for one little twelve-year old girl?"

"I am truly sorry, my friend," said the Lawyer. "You could try a petition to the Council, of course, but I am quite sure—*quite* sure—that it would be of no use. There is too much public reaction to a female's even attempting the ex-

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aminations, because it seems blasphemous even to many very broad-minded people. The Council would not dare to make an exception."

"I could make a galactic appeal."

"You could."

"There would be quite a scandal, you know, among the peoples of the galaxy, if they knew of this penalty being enforced on a child."

"My friend, my dear banharihn—think of what you are saying. You would create an international incident, an intergalactic international incident, with all that implies, bring down criticism upon our heads, most surely incur an investigation of our religious customs by the intergalactic police, which would in turn call for a protest from our government, which in its turn—"

"You know I would not do it."

"I hope not. It would parallel the Trojan War for folly, my friend—all that for the sake of one female child!"

"We are a barbaric people."

The Lawyer nodded. "After ten thousand years, you know, if barbarism remains it becomes very firmly entrenched."

The Lawyer rose to go, throwing his heavy blue cloak around him. "After all," he said, "it is only one female child."

It was all very well, thought the Khadilh when his friend was gone, all very well to say that. The Lawyer had no doubt never had the opportunity to see the result of a lifetime of solitary confinement in total silence, or he would have been less willing to see a child condemned to such a fate.

The Khadilh's sister had been nearly thirty, and yet unmarried, when she had chosen to compete, and she was forty-six now. It had been an impulse of folly, born of thirty years of boredom, and the Khadilh blamed his parents. Enough dowry should have been provided to make even Grace, ugly as she was, an acceptable bride for someone, somewhere.

The room in the Small Corridor, where she had been confined since her failure, had no window, no com-system, nothing. Her food was passed through a slot in one wall, as were the few books and papers which she was allowed—all these things being very rigidly regulated by the Women's Discipline Unit.

It was the duty of the Khadilha Althea to go each morning to the narrow grate that enclosed a one-way window into the cell and to observe the prisoner inside. On the two occasions when that observation had disclosed physical illness, a dart containing an anesthetic had been fired through the food slot, and Grace had been rendered unconscious for the amount of time necessary to let a

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Doctor enter the cell and attend to her. She had had sixteen years of this, and it was the Khadilha who had had to watch her, through the first years when she alternately lay stuporous for days and then screamed and begged for release for days . . . and now she was quite mad. The Khadilh had observed her on two occasions when his wife had been too ill to go, and he had found it difficult to believe that the creature who crawled on all fours from one end of the room to the other, its matted hair thick with filth in spite of the servomechanisms that hurried from the walls to retrieve all waste and dirt, was his sister. It gibbered and whined and clawed at its flesh—it was hard to believe that it was human. And it had been only sixteen years. Jacinth was twelve!

The Khadilh called his wife's quarters and announced to her servingwomen that they were all to leave her. He went rapidly through the corridors of his house, over the delicate arched bridge that spanned the tea gardens around the women's quarters, and into the rooms where she stayed. He found her sitting in a small chair before her fireplace, watching the mobile plants that danced there to be near the warmth of the fire. As his sons had said, she was quite docile, and in very poor contact with reality.

He took a capsule from the pocket of his tunic and gave it to her to swallow, and when her eyes were clear of the mist of her drugged dreams, he spoke to her.

"You see that I have returned, Althea," he said. "I wish to know why my daughter has brought this ill fortune upon our household."

"It is her own idea," said the Khadilha in a bitter voice. "Since the last of her brothers was chosen, she has been thus determined, saying that it would be a great honor for our house should all of the children of ban-harihn be accepted for the faith."

It was as if a light had been turned on.

"This was not an impulse, then!" exclaimed the Khadilh.

"No. Since she was nine years old she has had this intention."

"But why was I not told? Why was I given no opportunity—" He stopped abruptly, knowing that he was being absurd. No woman would bother her husband with the problems of rearing a female child. But now he began to understand.

"She did not even know," his wife was saying, "that there was a living female Poet, although she had heard from someone that such a possibility existed. It was, she insisted, a matter of knowledge of the heart. When the Poet Anna-Mary singled her out at the procession . . . why, then, she was sure. Then she knew, she said, that she had been chosen."

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Of course. That in itself, being marked out for notice before the crowd, would have convinced the child that her selection was ordained by Divine choice. He could see it all now. And the Khadilha had taken the child to see her aunt in her cell in a last desperate attempt to dissuade her.

"The child is strong-willed for a female," he mused, "if the sight of poor Grace did not shake her."

His wife did not answer, and he sat there, almost too tired to move. He was trying to place the child Jacinth in his mind's eye, but it was useless. It had been at least four years since he had seen her, dressed in the brief white shift that all little girls wore: he remembered a slender child, he remembered dark hair—but then all little girls among his people were slender and dark-haired.

"You don't even remember her," said his wife, and he jumped, irritated at her shrewdness.

"You are quite right," he said. "I don't. Is she pretty?"

"She is beautiful. Not that it matters now."

The Khadilh thought for a moment, watching his wife's stoic face, and then, choosing his words with care, he said, "It had been my intention to register a complaint with the Women's Discipline Unit for your behavior, Khadilha Althea."

"I expected you to do so."

"You have had a good deal of experience with the agents of the WDU—the prospect does not upset you?"

"I am indifferent to it."

He believed her. He remembered very well the behavior of his wife at her last impregnation, for it had required four agents from the Unit to subdue her and fasten her to their marriage bed. And yet he knew that many women went willingly, even eagerly, to their appointments with their husbands. It was at times difficult for him to understand why he had not had Althea put on Permanent Medication from the very beginning; certainly, it would not have been difficult to secure permission to take a second, more womanly wife. Unfortunately he was softhearted, and she had been the mother of his eldest son, and so he had put up with her, relying upon his concubines for feminine softness and ardor. Certainly Althea had hardened with the years, not softened.

"I have decided," he finished abruptly, "that your behavior is not so scandalous as I had thought. I am not sure that I would not have reacted just as you did under the circumstances, if I had known the girl's plans. I will make no complaint, therefore."

"You are indulgent."

He scanned her face, still lovely for all her years, for signs of impertinence, but there was none,

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and he went on: "However, you understand that our eldest son must decide for himself if he wishes to forego his own complaint. Your disobedience to him was your first, you know. I have become accustomed to it."

He turned on his heel and left her, amused at his own weakness, but he canceled the Medication order when he went past the entrance to her quarters. She was a woman, she had meant to keep her daughter from becoming what Grace had become; it was not so hard to undersatnd, after all.

The family did not go to the University on the day of the examinations. They waited at home, prepared for the inevitable as well as they could prepare.

Another room, near the room where Grace was kept, had been made ready by the weeping servingwomen, and it stood open now, waiting.

The Khadilh had had his wife released from her quarters for the day, since she would have only the brief moment with her daughter, and thereafter would have only the duty of observing her each morning as she did her sister-in-law. She sat at his feet now in their common room, making no sound, her face bleached white, wondering, he supposed, what she would do now. She had no other daughter, there were no other sisters. She would be alone in the household except for her servingwomen, until such a time as Michael should, perhaps, provide her with a granddaughter. His heart ached for her, alone in a household of men, and five of them, before very long, to be allowed to speak only in the rhymed couplets of the Poets.

"Father?"

The Khadilh looked up, surprised. It was his youngest son, the boy James.

"Father," said the boy, "could she pass? I mean, is it possible that she could pass?"

Michael answered for him. "James, she is only twelve, and a female. She has had no education, she can only just barely read. Don't ask foolish questions. Don't you remember the examinations?"

"I remember," said James firmly. "Still, I wondered. There is the poet Anna-Mary."

"The third in who knows how many hundreds of years, James," Michael said. "I shouldn't count on it if I were you."

"But is it possible?" the boy insisted. "Is it possible, Father?"

"I don't think so, son," said the Khadilh gently. "It would be a very curious thing if an untrained twelve-year old female could pass the examinations that I could not pass myself when I was sixteen, don't you think?"

"And then," said the boy, "she may never see anyone again, so long as she lives, never speak to

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anyone, never look out a window, never leave that little room?"

"Never."

"That is a cruel law!" said the boy. "Why has it not been changed?"

"My son," said the Khadilh, "it is not something that happens often, and the Council has many, many other things to do. It is an ancient law, and the knowledge that it exists offers to bored young females something exciting to think about. It is intended to frighten them, my son."

"One day, when I have power enough, I shall have it changed."

The Khadilh raised his hand to hush the laughter of the older boys. "Let him alone," he snapped. "He is young, and she is his sister. Let us have a spirit of compassion in this house, if we must have tragedy."

A thought occurred to him, then. "James," he said, "you take a great deal of interest in this matter. Is it possible that you were somehow involved in this idiocy of your sister's?"

At once he knew he had struck a sensitive spot; tears sprang to the boy's eyes and he bit his lip fiercely.

"James—in what way were you involved? What do you know of this affair?"

"You will be angry, my father," said James, "but that is not the worst. What is worse is that I will have condemned my sister to—"

"James," said the Khadilh, "I have no interest in your self-accusations. Explain at once, simply and without dramatics."

"Well, we used to practice, she and I," said the boy hastily, his eyes on the floor. "I did not think I would pass, you know. I could see it—all of the others would pass, and I would not, and there I would be, the only one. People would say, there he goes, the only one of the sons of the ban-harihn who could not pass the Poetry exam."

"And?"

"And so we practiced together, she and I," he said. "I would set the subject and the form and do the first stanza, and then she would write the reply."

"When did you do this? Where?"

"In the gardens, Father, ever since she was little. She's very good at it, she really is, Father."

"She can rhyme? She knows the forms?"

"Yes, Father! And she *is* good, she has a gift for it—Father, she's much better than I am. I am ashamed to say that, of a female, but it would be a lie to say anything else."

The things that went on in one's household! The Khadilh was amazed and dismayed, and he was annoyed besides. Not that it was unusual for brothers and sisters, while still young, to spend time together, but surely one of

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the servants, or one of the family, ought to have noticed that the two little ones were playing at Poetry?

"What else goes on in my house beneath the blind eyes and deaf ears of those I entrust with its welfare?" he demanded furiously, and no one hazarded an answer. He made a sound of disgust and went to the window to look out over the gardens that stretched down to the narrow river behind the house. It had begun to rain, a soft green rain not much more than a mist, and the river was blurred velvet through the veil of water. Another time he would have enjoyed the view; indeed, he might well have sent for his pencils and his sketching pad to record its beauty. But this was not a day for pleasure.

Unless, of course, Jacinth did pass.

It was, on the face of it, an absurdity. The examinations for Poetry were far different than those for the other Professions. In the others it was a straightforward matter: one went to the examining room, an examination was distributed, one spent perhaps six hours in such exams, and they were then scored by computer. Then, in a few days, there would come the little notice by com-system, stating that one had or had not passed the fitness exams for Law or Business or whatever.

Poetry was a different matter. There were many degrees of fitness, all the way from the First Level, which fitted a man for the lower offices of the faith, through five more subordinate levels, to the Seventh Level. Very rarely did anyone enter the Seventh Level. Since there was no question of being promoted from one level to another, a man being placed at his appropriate rank by the examinations at the very beginning, there were times when the Seventh Level remained vacant for as long as a year. Michael had been placed at the Fourth Level instead of the First, like the others of his sons, and the Khadilh had been awed at the implications.

For Poetry there was first an examination of the usual kind, marked by hand and scored by machine, just as in the other Professions. But then, if that exam was passed, there was something unique to do. The Khadilh had not passed that exam and he had no knowledge of what came next, except that it involved the computers.

"Michael," he said, musing, "how does it go exactly, the Poetry exam by the computer?"

Michael came over to stand beside him. "You mean, should Jacinth pass the written examination, even if just by chance, then what happens?"

"Yes. Tell me."

"It's simple enough. You go into the booths where the computer panels are and push a

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READY button. Then the computer gives you your instructions."

"For example?"

"Let's see. For example, it might say—SUBJECT: LOVE OF COUNTRY . . . FORM: SONNET, UNRESTRICTED BUT RHYMED . . . STYLE: FORMAL, SUITABLE FOR AN OFFICIAL BANQUET. And then you would begin."

"Are you allowed to use paper and pen, my son?"

"Oh, no, Father." Michael was smiling, no doubt, thought the Khadilh, at his father's innocence. "No paper or pencil. And you begin at once."

"No time to think."

"No, Father, none."

"Then what?"

"Then, sometimes, you are sent to another computer, one that gives more difficult subjects. I suppose it must be the same all the way to the Seventh Level, except that the subject would grow more difficult."

The Khadilh thought it over. For his own office of Khadilh, which meant little more than "Administrator of Large Estates and Households", he had had to take one oral examination, and that had been in ordinary straightforward prose, and the examiner had been a man, not a computer, and he still remembered the incredible stupidity of his answers. He had sat flabbergasted at the things that issued from his mouth, and he had been convinced that he could not possibly have passed the examination. And Jacinth was only twelve years old, with none of the training that boys received in prosody, none of the summer workshops in the different forms, scarcely even an acquaintance with the history of the classics. Surely she would be too terrified to speak? Why, the simple modesty of her femaleness ought to be enough to keep her mute, and then she would fail, even if she should somehow be lucky enough to pass the written exam. Damn the girl!

"Michael," he asked, "what is the level of the Poet Anna-Mary?"

"Second Level, Father."

"Thank you, my son. You have been very helpful—you may sit down now, if you like."

He stood a moment more, watching the rain, and then went back and sat down again by his wife. Her hands flew, busy with the little needles used to make the complicated hoods the Poets wore. She was determined that her sons should, in accordance with the ancient tradition, have every stitch of their installation garments made by her hands, although no one would have criticized her if she had had the work done by others, since she had so many sons needing the garments. He was pleased with her, for once, and he made a mental note to have a gift sent to her later.

The bells rang in the city, sig-

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naling the four o'clock Hour of Meditation, and the Khadilh's sons looked at one another, hesitating. By the rules of their Major that hour was to be spent in their rooms, but their father had specifically asked that they stay with him.

The Khadilh sighed, making another mental note, that he must sigh less. It was an unnattractive habit.

"My sons," he said, "you must conform to the rules of your Major. Please consider that my first wish."

They thanked him and left the room, and there he sat, watching first the darting fingers of the Khadilha and then the dancing of the mobile flowers, until shadows began to streak across the tiled floor of the room. Six o'clock came, and then seven, and still no word. When his sons returned, he sent them away crossly, seeing no reason why they should share in his misery.

By the time the double suns had set over the river he had lost the compassion he had counseled for the others and become furious with Jacinth as well as the system. That one insignificant female child could create such havoc for him and for his household amazed him. He began to understand the significance of the rule, the law began to seem less harsh. He had missed his dinner and he had spent his day in unutterable tedium. His orchards were doubtless covered with insects and dying of thirst and neglect, his bank account was depleted by the expense of the trip home, the cost of extra garden-robots on Earth, the cost of the useless visit from the Lawyer. And his nervous system was shattered, and the peace of his household destroyed. All this from the antics of one twelve-year old female child! And when she had to be shut up, there would be the necessity of living with her mother as she watched the child deteriorate into a crawling mass of filth and madness as Grace had done. Was his family cursed, that its females should bring down the wrath of the universe at large in this manner?

He struck his fists together in rage and frustration, and the Khadilha jumped, startled.

"Shall I send for music, my husband?" she asked. "Or perhaps you would like to have your dinner served here? Perhaps you would like a good wine?"

"Perhaps a dozen dancing girls!" he shouted. "Perhaps a Venusian flame-tiger! Perhaps a parade of Earth elephants and a Tentacle Bird from the Extreme Moons! May all the suffering gods take pity upon me!"

"I beg your pardon," said the Khadilha. "I have angered you."

"It is not you who have angered me," he retorted, "it is that miserable female of a daughter

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that you bore me, who has caused me untold sorrow and expense, that has angered me!"

"Very soon now," pointed out the Khadilha softly, "she will be out of your sight and hearing forever; perhaps then she will anger you less."

The Khadilha's wit, sometimes put to uncomfortable uses, had been one of the reasons he had kept her all these years. At this moment, however, he wished her stupider and timider and a thousand light-years away.

"Must you be right, at a time like this?" he demanded. "It is unbecoming in a woman."

"Yes, my husband."

"It grows late."

"Yes, indeed."

"What could they be doing over there?"

He reached over to the com-system and instructed the Housekeeper to send someone with a videocolor console. It was just possible that somewhere in the galaxy something was happening that would distract him from his misery.

He skimmed the videobands rapidly, muttering. There was a new drama by some unknown avant-garde playwright, depicting a liaison between the daughter of a Council member and a servo-mechanism. There was a game of jidra, both teams apparently from the Extreme Moons, if their size could be taken as any indication. There were half a dozen variety programs, each worse than the last. Finally he found a newsband and leaned forward, his ear caught by the words of the improbably sleek young man reading the announcements.

Had he said—yes! He had. He was announcing the results of the examinations in Poetry. "—ended at four o'clock this afternoon, with only eighty-three candidates accepted out of almost three thousand who—"

"Of course!" he shouted. How stupid he had been not to have realized, sooner, that since all members of Poetry were bound by oath to observe the four o'clock Hour of Meditation, the examinations would have had to end by four o'clock! But why, then, had no one come to notify them or to return their daughter? It was very near nine o'clock.

The smallest whisper of hope touched him. It was possible, just possible, that the delay was because even the callous members of the Poetry Unit were finding it difficult to condemn a little girl to a life of solitary confinement. Perhaps they were meeting to discuss it, perhaps something was being arranged, some loophole in the law being found that could be used to prevent such a travesty of justice.

He switched off the video and punched the call numbers of the Poetry Unit on the com-system.

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At once the screen was filled by the embroidered hood and bearded face of a Poet, First Level, smiling helpfully through the superimposed matrix-mark of his household.

The Khadilh explained his problem, and the Poet smiled and nodded.

"Messengers are on their way to your household at this moment, Khadilh ban-harihn," he said. "We regret the delay, but it takes time, you know. All these things take time."

"What things?" demanded the Khadilh. "And why are you speaking to me in prose? Are you not a Poet?"

"The Khadilh seems upset," said the Poet in a soothing voice. "He should know that those Poets who serve the Poetry Unit as communicators are excused from the laws of verse-speaking while on duty."

"Someone is coming now?"

"Messengers are on their way."

"On foot? By earth-style robot-mule? Why not a message by com-system?"

The Poet shook his head. "We are a very old profession, Khadilh ban-harihn. There are many traditions to be observed. Speed, I fear, is not among those traditions."

"What message are they bringing?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you that," said the Poet patiently.

Such control! thought the Khadilh. Such unending saint-like tolerance! It was maddening.

"Terminate with thanks," said the Khadilh, and turned off the bland face of the Poet. At his feet the Khadilha had set aside her work and sat trembling. He reached over and patted her hand, wishing there were some comfort he could offer.

Had they better go ahead and call for dinner? He wondered if either of them would be able to eat.

"Althea," he began, and at that moment the servingwomen showed in the messengers of the Poetry Unit, and the Khadilh rose to his feet.

"Well?" he demanded abruptly. He would be damned if he was going to engage in the usual interminable preliminaries. "Where is my daughter?"

"We have brought your daughter with us, Khadilh ban-harihn."

"Well, where is she?"

"If the Khadilh will only calm himself."

"I am calm! Now where is my daughter?"

The senior messenger raised one hand, formally, for silence, and in an irritating sing-song he began to speak.

"The daughter of the Khadilh ban-harihn will be permitted to approach and to speak to her parents for one minute only, by the clock which I hold, giving to her

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parents whatever message of farewell she should choose. Once she has given her message, the daughter of the Khadilh will be taken away and it will not be possible for the Khadilh or his household to communicate with her again except by special petition from the Council."

The Khadilh was dumbfounded. He could feel his wife shaking uncontrollably beside him—was she about to cause a second scandal?

"Leave the room if you cannot control your emotion, Khadilha," he ordered her softly, and she responded with an immediate and icy calm of bearing. Much better.

"What do you mean," he asked the messenger, "by stating that you are about to take my daughter away again? Surely it is not the desire of the Council that she be punished outside the confines of my house!"

"Punished?" asked the messenger. "There is no punishment in question, Khadilh. It is merely that the course of study which she must follow henceforth cannot be provided for her except at the Temple of the University."

It was the Khadilh's turn to tremble now. She had passed!

"Please," he said hoarsely, "would you make yourself clear? Am I to understand that my daughter has passed the examination?"

"Certainly," said the messenger. "This is indeed a day of great honor for the household of the ban-harihn. You can be most proud, Khadilh, for your daughter has only just completed the final examination and has been placed in Seventh Level. A festival will be declared, and an official announcement will be made. A day of holiday will be ordered for all citizens of the planet Abba, in all city-clusters and throughout the countryside. It is a time of great rejoicing!"

The man went on and on, his curiously contrived-sounding remarks unwinding amid punctuating sighs and nods from the other messengers, but the Khadilh did not hear any more. He sank back in his chair, deaf to the list of the multitude of honors and happenings that would come to pass as a result of this extraordinary thing. Seventh Level! How could such a thing be?

Dimly he was aware that the Khadilha was weeping quite openly, and he used one numb hand to draw her veils across her face.

"Only one minute, by the clock," the messenger was saying. "You do understand? You are not to touch the Poet-Candidate, nor are you to interfere with her in any way. She is allowed one message of farewell, nothing more."

And then they let his daughter, this stranger who had performed a miracle, whom he would not even have recognized in a crowd, come

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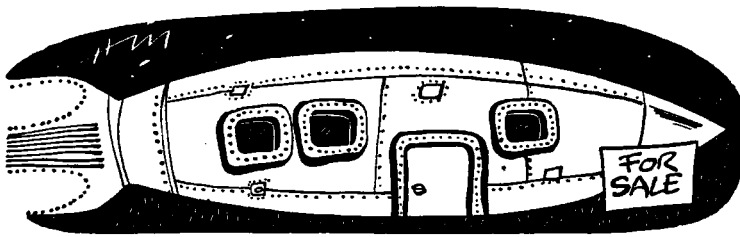
forward into the room and approach him. She looked very young and very tired, and he held his breath to hear what she would say to him.

However, it was no message of farewell that she had to give them. Said the Poet-Candidate, Seventh Level, Jacinth banharihn: "You will send someone at once to inform my Aunt Grace that I have been appointed to the Seventh Level of the Profession of Poetry; permission has been granted by the Council for the breaking of her solitary confinement for so long as it may take to make my aunt understand just what has happened."

And then she was gone, followed by the messengers, leaving only the muted tinkling showers of sparks from the dancing flowers and the soft drumming of the rain on the roof to punctuate the silence.



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SCIENCE

THE POWER OF PROGRESSION

by Isaac Asimov

I LIVE, WHEN I AM WRITING (WHICH IS MOST OF THE TIME), IN the attic of a suburban middle-class house that is rather on the modest side, but is reasonably comfortable.

I am solvent, always have been, and, with reasonable luck, always will be, for I am generously paid for doing what I most want to do in the world. My scale of living is not lavish, for there's nothing much I want out of life beyond a working electric typewriter and a steady stream of blank paper; but what I want, I have, or can get.

I have no boss and no employees, so I am my own master in both directions. My editors are (and always have been) so considerate of my feelings as never to give me a cross word. I am in no trouble with the authorities and (again with reasonable luck) hope never to be.

In short, I live, immersed in my work and in my content, in the richest nation on Earth, in the period of that nation's maximum power.

What a pity, then, that it is all illusion and that I cannot blind myself to the truth. My island of comfort is but a quiet bubble in a torrent that is heaving its way down-hill to utter catastrophe. I see nothing to stand in its way and can only watch in helpless horror.

The matter can be expressed in a single word: Population.*

There are many who moan about the "population explosion," but they are rarely specific and their worry is easily shrugged away by the comfortable and indifferent. Population has always been expand-

* *I've discussed this before, notably in "Fecundity Limited" in the old Venture Science Fiction (January, 1958) but I want to do so now again, more accurately and in more detail.*

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ing, it would seem, and the standard of living has gone up with it, hasn't it?

After all, more hands and more minds means more cooperation and more inventiveness, and therefore more progress. A million men can do more than a hundred men can, and their added abilities more than make up for the added difficulties introduced by the interactions of a million rather than a hundred.

And the proof rests in the results. The population of the Earth in 1969 is estimated to be 3,500,000,000, which is far higher than it has ever been in history. Yet the overall standard of living on Earth in 1969 is also far higher than it has ever been in history. This is not to say there aren't hundreds of millions who are constantly hungry; hundreds of millions who are downtrodden, frightened, and enslaved —but in the past, it has always been even worse.

Well, then, what are we worried about? Why may we not expect that population and living standard will continue to rise, hand in hand?

That outlook reminds me of the tale of the man who fell off the Empire State Building. As he passed the tenth story, he was heard to mutter, "Well, I've fallen ninety stories and I'm all right so far."

Suppose we look at the history of the Earth's population, gathering the best estimates we can find.

Ecologists feel that the preagricultural food supply—obtainable by hunting, fishing, collecting wild fruit and nuts, and so on—could not support a world population of more than twenty million; and in all likelihood the actual population during the Stone Age was never more than a third or half of this at most.

This means that as late as 6000 B.C., the world population could not have numbered more than 6 to 10 million people—roughly the population of New York, Shanghai, or Tokyo today. (When America was discovered, the food-gathering Indians occupying what is now the United States probably numbered not much more than 250,000, which is like imagining the population of Dayton, Ohio, spread out over the nation.)

The first big jump in world population came with the introduction of agriculture, when the river civilizations along the Nile, the Tigris-Euphrates, and the Indus began, by dint of irrigation, to grow food in quantity rather than to gather it. This made possible the establishment of a much denser population than had hitherto been able to exist in those areas.

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The increase of population, thereafter, paralleled the opening of new lands to agriculture. By the beginning of the Bronze Age, the world population may have been 25 million; by the beginning of the Iron Age, 70 million.

At the time of the start of the Christian era, world population may have been about 150 million, with one third concentrated in the Roman Empire, another third in the Chinese Empire, and the rest scattered over the rest of the world.

The fall of the Roman Empire meant a local decline of population, but the worst of the effects were concentrated in western Europe, and it is doubtful if the world population went down much, if at all. Furthermore, by the year 1000, the invention of the horse-shoe, the horse-collar and the mold-board plow, had made the horse an efficient farm animal so that the cold, damp forest land of northwestern Europe could be cleared and turned to agriculture. By 1600, the world population stood at 500 million.

European explorers opened up 18,000,000 square miles of new land in the Americas and elsewhere, and the Industrial Revolution mechanized agriculture, so that the necessary proportion of farmers to non-farmers began to drop. Agriculture could support more and more people per acre of farmland. By 1800, world population was 900 million; by 1900, it was 1600 million; by 1950, it was 2500 million; and in 1969 it is, as aforesaid, 3500 million.

Looking at these figures, let's consider the length of time it takes to double the Earth population.

Up through 100 A.D., the Earth's population doubled, on the average, every 1400 years. This is an extremely slow rate of doubling when you consider that if every married couple has four children and then dies, the Earth's population would double in a single generation of, say, thirty-three years. Can it be that our prehistoric and ancient ancestors didn't know how to go about having children?

Of course not. They had children with all the facility we display today. The trouble is that most of the children died before their fifth birthday. Growing to maturity was a comparative rarity, and even those who made it were lucky if they lived the aforesaid thirty-three years.

The inexorable shortness of life is clearly recorded in world literature, but times have changed, and we forget and misinterpret.

In the *Iliad,* Homer speaks of Nestor who "outlived two whole generations of his subjects, and was ruling over a third." Naturally we think of him as an ancient, ancient man—but he wasn't. He was

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probably about sixty; that would have been long enough to bury almost every father and son in his kingdom and to be ruling over grandsons.

Most early societies were ruled by "elders" of one sort or another. The Romans had their "Senate," which is simply from a Latin word meaning "old" so that a Senator is a Latinized elder. The feeling now, therefore, is that these societies were run by senile (same root as senator) gray-beards.

Nonsense! In an early society, anyone who made it past thirty-five was an "elder." If you want some interesting corroboration of that, just remember that membership in our own club of ruling elders, the United States Senate, requires a minimum age of 30. To the founding fathers in 1787, this seemed quite old enough for the purpose. If we were starting from scratch today, I'll bet we would have set the minimum at 40, at least.

Even in Shakespeare's time, the notions of old age were not like ours. *Richard II* begins with the wonderful line: "Old John of Gaunt, time-honored Lancaster," so that old Gaunt is invariably presented in any production of the play as a man of about 150, who can just manage to hobble across the stage. Actually, at the time the play opened, good old time-honored Lancaster was 58 years old.

You may think that Shakespeare didn't happen to know that. Well, then, in *King Lear*, the Duke of Kent describes himself at one point by saying, "I have years on my back forty-eight," and then later on in the play he is referred to as an "ancient ruffian."

We can see, then, why the first Divine command to mankind which is recorded in the Bible is "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth . . ." (Genesis 1:28).

If, under ancient conditions, man were not fruitful, he would not multiply. Only by having as many children as possible could he rely on a few surviving long enough to have children of their own.

But times have changed! The earth is replenished and it is no longer necessary to be endlessly fruitful in order to have a few survive. Those who take these words of the Bible, applicable to one set of conditions, and insist on applying them literally to a completely altered set of conditions are doing mankind an enormous disservice. If I spoke in theological terms, I'd say they were doing the Devil's work.

As conditions improved and as the death rate fell somewhat and life expectancy lengthened, the time required to double the Earth's population grew shorter. Here are my estimates for the "doubling time" at various stages in history:

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up to 100 A.D.	1,400 years
100-1600 A.D.	900 years
1600-1800 A.D.	250 years
1800-1900 A.D.	90 years
1900-1950 A.D.	75 years
1950-1969 A.D.	47 years

You see, then, that it is not merely that the population is increasing that is the worst of it; it is that the *rate* at which population is increasing is itself increasing. That is what makes the situation explosive. And the situation is worst in those areas where it can least afford to be bad. In the Philippine Islands, the current rate of increase implies a doubling time of only 22 years.

This decrease in doubling time has been brought about by an unbalanced decrease in the death rate. Birth rates have gone down, too, but not nearly enough to compensate, and they have gone down least in the "underdeveloped" portions of the Earth.

What can we do now?

In order to make some decision, let's get one thing clear. The situation cannot be allowed to continue. I don't mean that the doubling time must not be allowed to continue decreasing. It's worse than that. Doubling time must not even be allowed to stay where it is.

Oh, there are optimists (and in this connection I find it hard to refer to them by that word; I prefer to think of them as idiots) who think that if only we end wars, establish world tranquillity and advance science we can absorb population increase. We need only farm scientifically, make intelligent use of fertilizers, put the ocean to efficient use as a source of food and fresh water and minerals, develop fusion power, harness the Sun— Then we can easily support a *much* larger population than now exists. I have seen statements to the effect that the Earth, Utopically run, could support 50 billion human beings in comfort.

But then what? What's to prevent the population from increasing beyond that? Would not some form of birth control be required then? In other words, the greatest optimist cannot deny the necessity of birth control eventually; he merely says, "Not yet!"

Is it possible that such an optimist has a dim idea that the time when the Earth's population will reach 50 billion (or whatever generous limit he sets) is so far off that no one need worry now? Or, worse yet, does he have the idea that by the time 50 billion is reached,

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further scientific advance will make it possible to support still higher numbers and so on into the indefinite future?

If that is so, then the optimist hasn't the faintest idea of the power of a geometric progression. But then, hardly anyone does. Let's see if we can't illustrate that power.

Since the Earth's population is 3.5 billion people and since that population is now doubling at the rate of once every 47 years, we can make use of the following equation:

$$(3{,}500{,}000{,}000)\ 2^{x/47} = y \qquad \text{(Equation 1)}$$

This tells us the number of years (x) it will take us to reach a world population of y, supposing that the doubling rate remains absolutely constant. Solving for x in Equation 1, we get:

$$x = 156\ (\log y - 9.54) \qquad \text{(Equation 2)}$$

Suppose we ask ourselves, now, how long it will be before we reach that population of 50 billion that optimists think a Utopian Earth can support.

Well, if y is set at 50,000,000,000, then $\log y$ is 10.70 and x is equal to 182 years.

In other words, if the doubling rate continues exactly as now, we will have reached a world population of 50,000,000,000 by 2151 A.D.

The wildest optimism is required if you think that in the space of time in which the American Constitution has thus far existed (six generations) we are going to be able to abolish war and establish the kind of rational Utopia which would make so large a population possible and comfortable.

Even then, we would be much nearer a colossal catastrophe in case anything happened to go wrong with 50 billion people encumbering the Earth than the present 3.5 billion. And what if population continued to increase even past the 50 billion mark? Could we still rely on science to continue to make higher populations possible. How high can populations go in the reasonable future?

Let's move on and see—

The island of Manhattan has an area of 22 square miles and a population of 1,750,000. In the middle of the working day, when people come to Manhattan from adjoining areas, the population jumps to 2,200,000 at least; at which time the population density is 100,000 people per square mile.

Suppose all the Earth were covered with people as thickly as Manhattan is at lunch-time. Suppose the Sahara desert were covered that thickly, and the Himalayan Mountains, and Greenland and Ant-

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arctica and everywhere else. Suppose we threw planks over all the oceans and crowded those planks like a Manhattan lunch-hour as well.

The Earth's total surface area is 200,000,000 square miles. If all of it were populated at Manhattan-density, the world population would be 20,000,000,000,000, or 20 trillion. How long, now, would it take to reach that figure?

As Equation 2 would tell you, the answer is the astonishingly small one of 585 years. By 2554 A.D., at the present rate of increase, Earth's surface will become one huge Manhattan.

Of course, you may decide not to let me get away with that. I am, after all, a science fiction writer at times, and I know all about space travel. Surely by 2554 A.D. men will be flitting all over the Solar system and will therefore be able to populate the planets, which will then be able to absorb some of the population excess from Earth.

Sorry, but that's not good enough. In the next 47 years, we would have to export 3.5 billion people to the Moon and Mars and wherever, just in order to stay where we are now on Earth. Is there anyone here who thinks we can do that in 47 years? Is there anyone here who thinks the Moon and Mars and wherever can be engineered to support 3.5 billion people in the next 47 years even if we could get them there?

In fact, let's go farther. There are about 135,000,000,000 stars in the Galaxy. Some of them may have habitable planets in the sense that men could live on them without prohibitive engineering.

Of course, we can't reach such planets, either now or in the foreseeable future, but suppose we could. Suppose we could transfer human beings instantaneously to any planet we wished by a mere snap of the fingers and with no further expenditure of energy than that. And suppose that there were an incredible wealth of habitable planets in the Galaxy; suppose that every single star in the Galaxy had ten such planets. There would then be 1,350,000,000,000 habitable planets in the Galaxy.

Suppose further that the same were true of every other galaxy and that (as some estimate) there are a hundred billion such galaxies in existence. This means there would be 135,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 habitable planets altogether.

Finally, what if we continued snapping fingers and transferring people until every one of these planets were populated to Manhattan-density. The total population of the Universe would then be 2,700,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, or 2.7 trillion trillion trillion.

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How long would it take us to reach such a population, eh? Now that we are talking of trillions of trillions of trillions of people, it might seem that we can wait many millions of years to fill the Universe in this impossible way. If you think so, you still don't understand the power of a geometric progression.

At the present rate of population increase, it will take us only 4,200 years to reach a population of 2.7 trillion trillion trillion. By 6170 A.D., we will have crammed the Universe from end to end with people. Every star in every galaxy will see each of its ten planets carrying a population that will resemble a Manhattan rush hour on every part of its surface.

Do you think I can't get any more extreme? Suppose man's scientific advance managed to turn all the Universe into food and to tap hyperspace for energy. How long would it take for the entire mass of the known Universe to be turned into human flesh and blood. The Sun has a mass of 4.4 million trillion trillion pounds. Estimate the average weight of a human being at 110 pounds and you find that if the Sun were converted into people, it would make up a population of 40,000 trillion trillion.

Multiply that by 135 billion to convert the Galaxy into people; multiply that again by 100 billion to convert all the galaxies into people; multiply that again by 100 to account for the dust and debris that exists in the Universe outside the stars, and the total mass of the Universe converted into people makes for a population of 54,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, or 54,000 trillion trillion trillion trillion.

How long will it take our progression to reach that? By now, you should have no high hopes. It will take 6,700 years. By the year 8700 A.D. we will have run completely out of Universe, and that's all there is to it.

In other words, science—no matter what it does—cannot keep up with population for very long.

It's an absolute certainty that we are not going to multiply at our present rate until we consume the entire Universe, or even until we merely fill the surfaces of all the planets. I think you will agree that the extreme of optimism will not carry us past the conversion of Earth itself into one big Manhattan. This means we have as our outside limit, the year 2554 A.D.—We have only a little over five and a half centuries left us.

Whatever happens to make the rate of population increase smaller, or abolish it altogether and give us a stable population, *must* happen

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before 2554 A.D. I don't say "should" or "ought to" or "might." I very deliberately say "must."

But do we really even have that much time? What does a planet-wide Manhattan mean?

The total mass of living objects on Earth is estimated at 20 trillion tons, while the present mass of humanity on Earth is about 200 million tons. This means that humanity makes up 1/100,000 of the total mass of life on Earth. That's pretty good for a single species.

All of life is supported by plant photosynthesis (with some insignificant bacterial exceptions). Animals can only survive by raiding the chemical energy (food) built up by plants out of solar energy. Even those animals who eat animals, only live because the eaten animals ate plants—or if they ate animals, too, then those animals ate plants. However far the chain extends, it comes to plants in the end.

It is estimated that the total mass of an eater in a food-chain must be only one-tenth the total mass of the eaten, if both are to survive at a stable population level. This means that all of animal life has a mass of 2 trillion tons and the mass of humanity is 1/10,000 of that.

Since radiation from the Sun is a fixed quantity and the efficiency of photosynthesis is also fixed, only so much animal life can be supported on Earth. Every time the human population increases in mass by one ton, the mass of non-human animal life must decrease by one ton to make room.

How long then, will it take the human race to increase to the point where its mass is equal to the maximum mass that animal life may have. The answer is 624 years. In other words, by the time all the Earth is Manhattanized, we will have had to kill off just about all of animal life. All the remaining wild life will be gone. All the fish in the sea, all the birds in the sky, all the worms underground; even all our own domestic animals and pets, from horses and cattle, to cats, dogs and parakeets will have to go, sacrificed at the altar of human procreation.

(Think of that, you conservationists, and remind yourselves frequently that while human population increases, animal life *must* dwindle and not all your piety, wit, or tears can do anything about it. If you want to fight the good fight for conservation, fight the better fight for population control.)

What's more, killing off animals is only part of it. All plant life would have to be converted into food plants, with as little non-food portion as possible. In the day when the Earth becomes one large

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Manhattan—one large planet-girdling office building—the only thing on Earth other than human beings will be those little cells in the algae tanks all over the roof of that building.

Theoretically, we could learn to utilize solar energy and convert it into synthetic food without the intervention of plants, but do you think we can work this out at a level necessary to support a population of twenty trillions within the next five or six centuries? I don't.

Nor is it only a matter of food. What about resources? Already, with a population of 3.5 billion and the present level of technology, we are eroding our soil, spreading our minerals thin, destroying our forests, and consuming irreplaceable coal and oil at a fearful rate. Remember, that as the population increases, the level of technology and therefore the consumption of resources increases even faster. It is estimated that by the time the population of the United States doubles, its level of energy consumption will have increased seven-fold.

And what about pollution? Already, with a population of 3.5 billion and the present level of technology, we are poisoning the land, sea and air to a dangerous extent. What will we be doing in a century when the population is 14 billion and waste-production has increased 50-fold?

These problems are perhaps not insoluble if we let them grow no worse, but they would even then be soluble only with great difficulty. How will they be solved if the resource-expenditure and the waste-production grow worse with each year, as they are doing and will continue to do.

Finally, what of human dignity? How decently can we live when crowds of human beings and their tools clog every highway, every street, every building, every piece of land? The human friction that results when space disappears and privacy is destroyed makes itself evident in increasing discontents and hatreds, and this friction will grow phenomenally worse as the population continues to multiply.

No, take it all in all, I don't see how we can dare let mankind increase at its present rate for even a single additional generation. We must reach a population plateau in the early decades of the 21st Century.

—And I'm sure we will, one way or another. If we do nothing but what comes naturally, the population increase will be brought to a halt by an inevitable rise in the death rate through the wars and civil rioting that worsening human friction and desperation will bring; through the epidemics that crowding and technological breakdown will bring; and through the famines that food-shortage will bring.

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The reasonable alternative is to reduce the birth-rate. That, too, will fall, naturally, when crowding and starvation makes human procreation less efficient, but do we want to wait for that? If we wait for that, the famines will start in places like India and Indonesia (I predict) by 1980.

Let me summarize as bluntly as possible—There is a race in man's future between a death-rate rise and a birth-rate decline, and by 2000, if the latter doesn't win, the former will.

SF Conventions, Theatre

1969 Lunacon (New York SF Conference) will be held at the Hotel McAlpin (formerly the Sheraton-Atlantic), 34th Street and Broadway, on April 11-13, beginning at noon on the 11th. The Guest of Honor is Robert A. W. Lowndes, long-time sf editor. Memberships: $2.00 in advance or $2.50 at the door. To join or for further information write: Mr. Franklin M. Dietz, President, N. Y. SF Society, Box 515 Washington Bridge Station, New York, N. Y. 10033. Please make checks payable to N. Y. SF Society.

The 20th Annual Midwestcon will be held June 28, 29, and 30th. $1.00 registration fee. For information, contact Lou Tabakow, 3953 St. Johns Terrace, Cincinnati, Ohio 45236.

A double bill production of Ray Bradbury's THE VELDT, plus DRACULA BABY, an original musical comedy based on Bram Stoker's characters, will be held on the evenings of April 25-26 and May 2-3 at Town Hall Theatre, Centerville, Ohio. For additional information write: John Jakes, c/o O/H/C, 3400 S. Dixie Drive, Dayton, Ohio 45439

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It would not be exaggerating to say that Lt. Ben Jolson of the Chameleon Corps, who can impersonate anyone or anything, has been in some pretty way-out situations in the past. His latest mission—that of posing as a gourmet drunk at a convention of cops in a police state—is not likely to disappoint Jolson fans or, for that matter, anyone interested in another fine speculative comedy by Ron Goulart.

COPSTATE

by Ron Goulart

CERAMIC OWLS, TOPPLING IN the next room, woke him. Ben Jolson elbowed himself carefully up off the low round bed. The long brunette girl was still half asleep, and he touched her gently on the shoulder. "Easy," said Jolson.

The girl muttered something in code, sat up awake. "Did I hear owls falling?"

A half dozen more clay owls—they came six in a box—fell off their shelf in the storeroom. "Somebody's stumbling around in the stock," said Jolson. He found his plyrobe and a blaster pistol.

From the room beyond the bedroom someone sang, "I'm going to move way out on the outskirts of town."

Jennifer put her palm flat on her bare stomach. "Is that a password he's trying?"

"The Political Espionage Office is still using numbers for signs and countersigns." He put his finger tips in the finger holes in the door and it slid open.

"You have a lot of owls in here," said the man the storeroom lights showed. He was in his mid-thirties, plump. With a shaggy moustache, a flowered suit and his silver bowtie undone. "They could all be done away with in a flicker of time. An instant." He snapped his fingers and a small square sandwich fell out of his sleeve. "I can't, without consulting retrieval, tell you right off what this particular type of owl, this particular type of very ugly owl, can

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be wiped out with. We could easily find out and deliver a fatal amount, eliminating the owl problem you have."

"I don't have a problem with them," said Jolson. "This is part of my ceramics warehouse you're in, right next door to my home. I'm in the ceramics business, wholesale."

"Even if you were retail, I wouldn't buy an owl," said the man. He found the dropped sandwich, bit at it. "Lovely, lovely. Deviled ham, teleported from the Solar System." From a flapped pocket in his yellow and red suit he took a flask of green wine. "The wine is delightful, too, a green from our own Barnum System. Not up to this planet's product but a good try, a near miss." He finished the sandwich and sipped wine.

Jolson studied him. "You're Dr. Yollando Seacroft."

"Exactly who I am," said Seacroft. The flask slipped from his hand. He dived and saved it from the stone floor. "You're Lt. Ben Jolson of the Chameleon Corps."

Jolson's pistol swung up slightly. "Oh, so?"

"Take a nice look," said Seacroft. "You're going to be," he began, stopped to drink the rest of the green wine, located a jug of red in an opposite pocket, "going to be me. This is a red, a synthetic claret made from seaweed on Murdstone. Murdstone synthetic claret is much underrated. My purpose, my purpose this evening, as opposed to my daily routine purpose as an expert of weaponry. My purpose, Lt. Jolson of the Chameleon Corps, is to enjoy myself. I'm drunk at this very moment."

"I noticed."

"It's a gourmet drunk. Mostly imported wines and spirits," explained Seacroft. "And all these little sandwiches. I have a whole pocket full of them. If you drink and don't eat, it plays havoc with your stomach. As a man of science, I know what I'm talking about."

"How did you know about me?"

"The food in that place your Political Espionage Office stuck me was dreadful, dreadful," said Seacroft. He teetered, righted himself by catching at a shelf in the big storeroom. Another six owls fell and broke. "I have nothing against androids, but they can't cook. The near-veal rollatini at that detention station is mostly god-awful, and they served frozen dumler beans. Frozen, if you please." He sat down suddenly on a crate of broken owls.

"Who told you about me?"

Seacroft ruffled his moustache with his thumb knuckle. "My moustache is full of hot sauce. From an earlier snack. Excuse me." He rubbed at his face in increasingly slower motion, then

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toppled back off the crate.

Jolson watched the weapons executive sleeping for a moment. "Jennifer," he called, "get Head Mickens on the phone."

"I'm right here," said a voice from the bedroom.

"He's right here. Just came in the front door," said Jennifer. Wearing a yellow shift, she stepped into the storeroom, followed by the Head of the Political Espionage Office on Barnum.

Head Mickens had prickly black hair, a sharp, sad face with hollow eyes and a high, lined forehead. He was patting his left side. "I have to take something and then we'll talk."

Jennifer found a push broom and started sweeping up fragments of pottery and clay. "A new assignment?" she said to Jolson.

He nodded, looked at the Head. "I thought you said auto-analysis cured you of pill-taking?"

"That was my hypochondria they cured. This is for my hay fever. Do you have any idea what the pollen count is out there in Keystone City tonight?"

"140," said Jolson. "Why is this drunken weapon-maker asleep in my storeroom?"

Head Mickens located a plaid spansule and swallowed it. "Things got out of hand, Ben. Dr. Seacroft voluntarily agreed to aid us, and I had one of our best PEO men escort him to that little complex of detention cottages we have out on the outskirts of Keystone. Our agent and Seacroft unfortunately stopped in at a wine-tasting on the way. As a result, Seacroft was told much too much about the Chameleon Corps assignment we have in mind. On top of that, Seacroft became angry with the robot chef at the cottage. Managed to use one of his weapons on the andy guards, and all their screws melted. He escaped through the commissary dishwashing room. He stopped to talk with several servomechanisms about his intention of calling on you. Which is why I scooted over here."

"Where are you going to send Ben?" asked Jennifer Hark.

Head Mickens pushed his cheeks. "Boy, my sinuses. These sinus headaches are twice as bad as the imaginary headaches I used to have. The assignment, the impersonation, is right here on Barnum this time."

"Where?" Jolson moved across to the brunette Jennifer and took the broom away from her.

"Well," said Head Mickens. "Well, remember, Ben, you have to do a certain number of assignments for us each year. There's no quitting the Chameleon Corps, even though you're semi-retired now."

"Okay, where?"

"In Lampwick Territory," said the Head, sneezing.

Jennifer said, "That's a terrible

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place. Full of that military junta's troops and the largest civilian police force in the Barnum System and all those militiamen and women volunteers. Lampwick Territory is a police state."

Head Mickens smiled sadly at the girl. "I wish you'd come back to work for us, Jennifer. You were one of our best agents."

The girl shook her head. "No. I'm not in the same position as Ben. I can quit. And I did, after that business on Esperanza last year. With all the dead people."

"I knew being buried alive would unsettle you," said the Head. "Still, it couldn't be helped. As Ben knows."

Jolson said, "I'm to impersonate Seacroft and go into Lampwick Territory. Why?"

"I always feel better," said Head Mickens as he uprighted a carton and sat on it, "explaining assignments in my office. Nonetheless, since Dr. Seacroft jumped the gun, I'll outline it now." He sneezed twice, shook his head to clear it. "Two days from now at the Sousa-Meller Palace Hotel in the capital city of Lampwick Territory, which is called Sousa-Meller City at the moment, there will be a convention of police and military men."

"Sousa-Meller," said Jolson. "He's the boss of the junta, isn't he?"

"Yes. After that rash of coups last summer he took over. As you know, Lampwick Territory is our best source of certain kinds of vegetable oil, and so the central Barnum government doesn't wish to break completely with the Sousa-Meller regime. Nor do we want to invade unless it's absolutely necessary. We have, therefore, to be cautious. One of the things the Political Espionage Office quietly encourages is anti-Sousa-Meller propaganda. That brings us to your job, Ben. You're to go into Lampwick Territory and bring out the manuscript of a novel. It's been arranged for you to be contacted at the hotel during the convention. The Seacroft masquerade is a perfect one for getting in and out of the territory and in and out of the hotel."

"A hotel full of soldiers and cops," said Jolson, "doesn't seem like the best setting for passing around a bootleg book."

"In Lampwick no place we pick is going to be ideal," said Head Mickens. "The manuscript will be microcarded of course."

Jolson's left cheek hollowed for an instant. "PEO must be in contact with this writer Myron Woolmer."

"Yes," said Mickens. "Not with him exactly, with his representatives. Woolmer was a leading Lampwick diplomat in the days before the juntas. He's been in hiding for several years, waiting for a chance to return to power. Meanwhile, he writes political

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novels. The one smuggled out of Lampwick two years ago, *The Sword and the Fist,* was a best seller all over the Barnum System of planets. At least in those places where they still have books."

"That novel didn't topple the Lampwick government," said Jolson.

"Books can't do everything. Propaganda takes time, too," said the Head. "This second novel is supposed to be a thinly disguised attack on Sousa-Meller. It will have considerable propaganda value."

Jolson said, "Woolmer's publishers are right here in Keystone City, aren't they? What happened to the man they must have sent in after the manuscript?"

Head Mickens rubbed his nose. "PEO isn't an errand boy for big business," he said. "Though, as a matter of fact, they did send a representative in and he was never heard from again."

"You ought," said Jennifer, "to risk Ben's life only on important things."

"How long do you expect this to take?" Jolson asked.

"The contact will meet you at the convention," said the Head. "You'll be sleep-briefed on the signs and countersigns. He will, when things look safe, pass you a microcopy of the book. Dr. Seacroft is scheduled to spend two days at the convention, demonstrating the latest riot-control weapons from his company, Seacroft Control. You get the book, pop it in a safe pocket, sell a few weapons and come home."

"How'd you get Seacroft to cooperate?"

"We offered him a case of vintage wine. It's enroute now, being teleported from Earth. Something called New York Burgundy."

"Ben, you shouldn't go in there with all those cops and soldiers," said Jennifer. "Head Mickens, here's Ben with the ability to change shape, to impersonate anyone. And you're using him as nothing more than a literary agent."

"Easy, Jennifer," said Jolson. Once you had been processed by the Chameleon Corps, you could not quit. Though CC had allowed Jolson to half retire and run his ceramics business, he was still on call to the Political Espionage Office. "Okay, I'll see you tomorrow, Head."

"Not until after ten," he said. When Head Mickens gathered up Seacroft, the doctor awoke and offered them all red wine and sandwiches.

The blind man dropped all his busts of Sousa-Meller when the first lady patrolman hit him with her stun rod. The busts were fist size, made of a low-grade plaster, and they smashed when they hit the tile sidewalk in front of the Sousa-Meller Palace Hotel. An-

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other green-uniformed lady patrolman, with arms like balloons, frisked the stunned peddler. "No sellers permit," she said. "As we suspected."

The third of the four lady police surrounding the blind man said, "And look at this." She held up an intact Sousa-Meller bust and pointed to its lack of a tax stamp.

The fourth lady stunned the blind man again, telling him, "Keep still."

"Ladies, dear ladies," said Jolson. He was wearing a candy-striped green suit, a butterfly bow-tie and carrying a large sample case of weapons. He looked now exactly like Dr. Yollando Seacroft, reeled slightly just as Seacroft usually did. He rested his suitcase, started to pick the blind peddler up. "So inefficient. The Seacroft stun rod, with self-extender, is much lighter. Much more efficient. I suggest you see my booth inside." He had the blind man up on his feet.

"Screw off," whispered the peddler. "You're messing up the tableau."

"We're staging a mock arrest," explained the lady police officer with the balloon arms. "For the benefit of the news media. Let me say, by the way, that you're much handsomer than your mug shots. Why don't you drop that bum and we'll do retakes."

"Forgive me, forgive me, you lovely ladies of the law," said Jolson. He turned the peddler loose, retrieved his sample case and pushed through the crowd around the hotel's revolving door.

The lobby glittered, as the sunlight coming through its stained-glass windows caught the brass buttons and gold braid and medals of the conventioning policemen and soldiers. Jolson had a difficult time picking out a bellhop.

"Dr. Seacroft, isn't it?" asked a grey-haired man in a grey civilian suit. "I'll take your suitcase. I'm Eames, the bell captain."

"No uniform?"

"It gets too confusing. You have no personal luggage?"

"My baskets and hampers of gourmet items will be delivered within the hour," Jolson told him. "I never bother with clothes and toilet articles. If you'd take the sample case right to the display room on the mezzanine."

"Why don't you come along," said the bent Eames, taking hold of the sample case. "They've given you one of the nicer booths in the display hall. Ooof, that's heavy."

"I'll take it then."

"No, no," said Eames, more bent. "Can't let the andies take over. Bellhops are no good if they can't tote." He moved away, toward a curving ramp with a gilt ornamental railing.

Jolson frowned at the little gold figures holding up the lamp

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balls which decorated the railing. "I never saw wood sprites with moustaches and beards before."

"They're supposed to be representations of our President-General, Umberto Sousa-Meller. All the art work in Lampwick Territory didn't make the transition to Sousa-Meller gracefully."

"The stained-glass windows came out not bad," said Jolson as they climbed.

Eames glanced up at the dozen colored-glass portraits of Sousa-Meller. "They used to be religious figures. Most of them already had beards." His thin voice added, "25-22-11-13-24-7-11."

Jolson, still watching the Sousa-Meller portraits, replied, "21-8-18-11-8-8."

Eames groaned under the weight of the sample case. He said, "Be in your booth in a half hour and I'll slip the microfile cards to you. It's a giant of a book and there are two cards. Microprinting is still primitive here. Your booth is third from the left as you enter."

At the doorway to the domed display room, Jolson took back his suitcase and said, "Fine. Take it easy." He handed Eames his chargecard, and the bent man slotted himself a tip with his pocket slotter.

The domed ceiling of the vast room was decorated with glazed tiles of graded shades of green and blue. Real palm trees were planted at frequent intervals in the earth-colored tile floor. At the booth nearest his, a high-breasted black girl was demonstrating an aerosol nerve gas on a caged mouse. Three Lt. Colonels of the Lampwick Army and four Sergeants of Detectives in the Municipal Police were watching. After each spraying, the mouse would appear to die, but then would rise up and skitter around the cage, holding its forelegs up in a cheese-asking gesture.

"My," said the black girl. "It's supposed to kill him dead, graveyard dead, with one puff."

Two of the three Lt. Colonels shook their heads in sympathy. The other said, "Too many kinks, too many kinks, miss." He noticed Jolson. "Ah, at last, Dr. Seacroft."

Jolson bowed, teetered, smiled and gestured up at the sign over his booth: SEACROFT—A WEAPON FOR EVERY NEED. "Open for business in one moment, dear friends. Dear friends and potential customers." He swung his case into the booth, jumped over the counter after it. He opened the case and took out a bottle of white wine. "Domestic blanc from Esperanza, made out of kelp but delicious. Especially good with fish, game birds and protein loaf. Wonderful with soy cakes. Candlelight and soy cakes, Esperanza blanc for two." He uncorked the bottle with a corkscrew attached

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to his watch chain. Drank from the bottle.

"His only weakness," said one of the policemen.

"Now then, gentlemen, and you as well, miss," said Jolson. He drew a bright yellow nightstick from his sample case, touched its handle. The nightstick flew across the big room, dodging palm tree boles and booths. It whacked a Technical Sergeant across the skull and flew smoothly back to Jolson's hand. "That was at 1, low gear. In high, he'd be knocked to the ground and stay there for thirty minutes or more."

"We need stronger stuff out my way," said another of the policemen. "We're from Ghetto 25A. You know that part of the country?"

Jolson told him, "There's a wonderful curry house there. Absolutely delicious food, absolutely delicious. Right near your alien relocation camp. Yes, I recall 25A fondly from many previous conventions." He sipped at his wine.

"We don't," said the 25A policeman, "like to kill them out there. We like to stun them good."

"Exactly," said Jolson, eating a tuna sandwich. "Seacroft has—and I'm selecting at random from a wide array—*this*, for instance." He held up a small capsule with his free hand. "Watch now." He flicked the capsule into the air. It rose, whirring, then dived at one of the Lt. Colonels. Attaching itself to his neck, it made a slight coughing sound. The soldier collapsed to the tiles. "He'll be asleep for a half an hour." The capsule detached itself and flew back to Jolson's thumb and forefinger. "For riots after dark it comes equipped with night lights."

"You shouldn't," said the 25A sergeant, "have demonstrated on Colonel LeFanu. He's in J2, the intelligence wing."

"Gentlemen, miss," said Jolson, "a demonstration against a mouse, or even a rat, is not much. Our problem, your problem, is not mice, or even rats, but rather unruly people. Let's be honest, honest and upright. A Seacroft demonstration of product deals, almost always, with realities."

"They mean," said the black girl, "you should have used it on a waiter or a bellhop. Not LeFanu."

Jolson started on a kelp sandwich, brushing crumbs from his moustache. "Anybody can stun a waiter. Seacroft can stun Lt. Colonels."

"I was intending to put my lunch on his chargecard," said another soldier. "I'm Lt. Colonel Kownoofle, specializing in counter-insurgency. I admire your ingenuity, Dr. Seacroft, but I wish you hadn't incapacitated my lunch partner."

Handing him a near-salami sandwich, Jolson said, "You must

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try to understand the civilian mind, Colonel.—Lt. Colonel."

In the doorway now appeared a lean, bald man. "Filth and scum!" he shouted.

"Isn't that that radical guy from Keystone City?" one of the policemen said.

"Dr. What's-his-name, the protester," said the 25A sergeant.

"That's Dr. Sedric Tenbrookes," said the black girl. "Author of *The Joy of Electronic Brain Implantation*. Best-selling self-help book last year."

The 25A sergeant said, "That's right, Tenbrookes, protester and troublemaker. They shouldn't have let him sneak in."

"Brutes and beasts!" shouted Tenbrookes. "What is it you have built here? A sty, an abattoir, an enclave of bums. This is nothing but a copstate." He sailed into the nearest display booth, followed by a dozen younger men who seemed to be with him. They disrupted the display. Threw tear-gas dispensers in the air, scattered stun grenades, trampled on pocket lie detectors and self-snapping manacles. Clouds of gas and deterrent powder rose, spread. From all around the vast domed room, police and military men began to converge on the Tenbrookes group.

Behind the growing disturbance, framed in the doorway, Jolson spotted Eames. The bent bell captain shrugged, mouthed the word *later* and withdrew. Turning to the black girl, Jolson said, "Care to duck down in the comparative safety of my booth until this is over?"

"Might as well." She brought her caged mouse with her.

Lampwick Territory was in the midst of a waltz craze, and most of the policemen and military men in the Sousa-Meller Palace Hotel's glass rooftop ballroom were waltzing. The night was a smoky grey color because of some riots in Ghettos 12 and 13. Jolson was dancing with a red-haired girl who was the sales representative for a portable indoctrination-unit company. Jolson was drinking red wine, waltzing slowly and eating a processed-cheese canape. "That's fascinating, entirely fascinating, Miss Peterman."

"Actually there are all sorts of places you can attach the questioning unit," she said in her small, polite voice. "Considerable field testing has convinced us the testicles are best. And we always recommend them in our brochures and instruction manual."

"Where did you say your booth was? I believe I must have missed your display, Miss Peterman."

She smiled. "We never display our units in public. Or give demonstrations. We're strictly mail order."

"Fascinating, nonetheless." Jolson danced the thin girl toward

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the arched doorway, trying to locate old Eames. The bell captain had implied he'd make the delivery of the microcards here at the ball.

Miss Peterman said, "We make bigger units as well. We have a nice mobile inquisition-unit. Easy to park and no trouble with spare parts. All solid-state."

A tray of ale schooners went by, and Jolson reached for one. "The ale, the humble Lampwick ale, though often maligned in many of the more civilized areas of our planet, is actually quite good, my dear Miss Peterman. It has, it has a tangy, nutlike flavor and it refreshes without filling."

"Dear me," said the bent man carrying the ale. It was Eames.

"Doubling as a waiter?" Jolson asked. He and the girl stopped waltzing and faced the downcast Eames.

"Let me tell you an interesting thing about this ale, sir," said Eames, "I'm afraid this anecdote is too ribald for young ladies, miss. Though I'd hate Dr. Seacroft to miss it."

"Excuse me a moment, Miss Peterman. As you know, food and drink lore fascinates me."

"A fine quality in a man," said the thin girl.

Jolson moved toward a palm tree with the anxious Eames. "Yes?"

"Quick. 25-22-11-13-24-7-11. Do you have an answer?"

"21-8-18-11-8-8," answered Jolson. "I told you this morning."

"That's what I was afraid of," said Eames. "I just handed the manuscript over to the real Dr. Seacroft."

"Seacroft?"

"He was down in the Earth-style restaurant on the second floor, dining with Lt. Colonel Kownoofle and Lt. Colonel LeFanu. When he went over to look at the pastry cart, I slipped by and put it in his pocket. He himself put a cream-filled chocolate cupcake in the same pocket just afterwards."

"Great," said Jolson. "Is he down there still?"

"No. He and the two soldiers and that girl whose nerve gas doesn't work all headed off to visit the chateau of the Possibilitarian Brotherhood."

"A monastery?"

Eames said, "That, and a winery. They bottle the Possibilitarian Brothers Wines. Seacroft is a gourmet drunk, you know."

"And loose from the detention cottages again," said Jolson. "Okay, where is the chateau?"

"About a mile from here. Just go north on Sousa-Meller Promenade and then left and uphill at Tower Hill Road," said the bent bell captain. "Be cautious, as there's more violence than usual tonight. According to the eleven o'clock news, the riot count is up."

"Give my apologies to Miss Pe-

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terman," said Jolson. He moved quickly and carefully through the dancing officers and out the rear exit.

The lady patrolman hit him first. Two blocks from the convention hotel, on a crowded stretch of mosaic sidewalk.

"Hey," said Jolson, rubbing the side of his head. He was still looking like Seacroft.

"Don't get excited," said the chubby blonde lady. "Just a routine clout. Let's see your identification papers."

While Jolson was getting out his fake ID packet, a militiaman came up and hit him up beside his ear. "You're still using that outmoded nightstick?" Jolson asked when his head cleared. "I'm in weaponry myself and we have a new nylon billy that's much more efficient."

"He giving you trouble, Idabelle?" The moonlight turned the militiaman's uniform purple.

"Why, this is Dr. Yollando Seacroft," said Idabelle, studying the chargecards and birth certificates. "We have your photo up in our meeting room. I'm sure sorry I bopped you so hard. I really should have recognized you."

"Coming up from behind as you did, you can be forgiven."

"We have a little weaponry fandom unit going." She handed back the false papers. "You're one of our idols. Along with Bascom Lamar Taffler, the inventor of Nerve Gas No. 414."

"I'm flattered, flattered beyond words, my dear Idabelle. Now I must be off on an important errand."

Three blocks further along, a retired parachute corpsman hit Jolson with a riding crop, and then two Street Marshals whacked him with clubs and asked for his papers.

"Glad to oblige, gentlemen."

"None of your civilian insolence," said the old parachutist.

"How many jumps did you make?" Jolson asked him, while the Street Marshals studied his ID's.

"That information is still classified."

"You say you're Dr. Yollando Seacroft?" asked one Marshal.

"My papers do, gentlemen, and I must agree."

"We just now returned from escorting Dr. Seacroft to the Possibilitarian chateau."

"I knew I'd seen you two fellows before." Jolson smiled at them. "I hate to admit it, but I'm lost again. Could you re-escort me?"

"Suspicious," said the second Marshal.

"While we're talking," said Jolson, "let's refresh ourselves." He slowly drew a bottle of Lampwick port from a coat pocket.

"Suspicious," said the other Marshal.

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"Well," said Jolson. He pivoted, jumped behind the parachute man and pushed. As the old man galloped unwillingly ahead into the two officers, Jolson swiped his riding crop. He skirted the tangle of off-balance men, pausing to swing out with both the wine bottle and the weighted crop. He ran as the three collapsed on the pavement. Jolson found the nearest alley a quarter of a block away and dived into it. He ran across two blocks by way of the alley and then slowed and came out on a quieter, less frequented street.

Across the way Jolson noticed that the door of a ten-story apartment building was standing open. He crossed over, entered and began searching for a place to get some new clothes.

"Yollando," said a voice above him. "Dad said you were in town."

Up on the next landing, grinning down on the gilt-windowed lobby, stood a small high-foreheaded man. Pale, with straight blond hair. He was wearing a pullover gym suit. "Yes, I am," Jolson said.

"It's me," said the young man. "We met at the last convention."

"Of course."

"That's okay," the young man said. "I know nobody ever remembers me. It's Dad who's the memorable one. Why wouldn't he be, with his face up every place."

"You're Sousa-Meller's son?"

"Sure. Honey Sousa-Meller," said the blond man, smiling. "I'm the Poet Laureate of Lampwick Territory. Come on up and have a drink, Yollando, and I'll read you a batch of my latest stuff."

"Splendid," said Jolson, finding the circular stairs that led up to the President-General's son. "You have an apartment here?"

"This apartment building is my home. The whole building. I need privacy when I write. Being Poet Laureate, I have to do about one epic poem a week, and I don't have to tell you that takes concentration. You can't have people waltzing in the next room or having two dozen of their friends in for a wake upstairs."

"Don't your servants make noise?"

"No servants. The whole building is automatic," said Honey Sousa-Meller. "I was coming down now to see why the front door is on the fritz. I was trying to work in my studio. I have six studios, actually. It all depends on my mood and subject matter. I was on the second floor composing an epic poem about proposed cuts in municipal bus service, and I heard the door buzz itself open."

"I imagine," said Jolson, "being Poet Laureate and related to the President-General, you can move about pretty easily. Myself, myself I've been having a series of rather amusing encounters built around the showing of my identification papers."

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"I noticed the welt rising over your left ear. As a matter of fact, nobody remembers me. So I always carry a set of ID papers in case of an emergency. I even have a set with me now." He pointed to his right hip.

Jolson hit him with the weighted riding crop, tied him up with the gym suit and put him in the closet of the nearest poetry studio. He found a suit of clothes, dark and conservative, and changed into them. He concentrated, leaning against a dictadesk. His face blurred, changed. He left the apartment building as Honey Sousa-Meller. He was only hit once more the rest of the way to the monastery.

The man in the sand-colored robe lit a cigar and rested an elbow against the incense burner. The bowl of incense tipped and burning grains fell out, starting the sleeve of his robe to smoldering. "Oops," said the man, who had introduced himself as Brother Sheldon.

The salesroom had thermal carpets on the floors and walls, so Jolson rolled the Possibilitarian Brother against the nearest wall until the sleeve stopped smoking. "Where did you say my friends were, Brother Sheldon?"

The tall, broad man stooped to pick up the spilled incense. "Down in Wine Cellar 6 with Brother William. He's showing them the new corking android we have." He shook his head. "All these wine fumes around here make me tipsy, Mr. Sousa-Meller. I'm woozy half the time. I'm sorry."

Jolson caught the brother's singed elbow and helped him get upright. "All in a good cause, as Dad often says about your enterprises, Brother Sheldon."

"He does? That's pleasant to hear," said the robed man. "We deal in the possible here. Try our very best and no more. Where's my cigar?"

"In the incense tray."

"So it is," said Brother Sheldon. "I'm relatively new here, Mr. Sousa-Meller. I used to work at our infirmary in Ghetto 25A, specializing in blows to the head. That's a nasty welt, by the way, you have. Hold my cigar and I'll look after it."

"No need, Brother Sheldon," said Jolson. "I heal quickly. If you'll show me to the proper cellar."

"I shouldn't be smoking this cigar—with my stomach. One of those kelp cigars from Barafunda." He sat on some gift-wrapped cases of wine. "Claret is the worst. I walk by those barrels of claret, and it's like a nightstick over the ear. We have a brewery near here and I tried to get assigned there. You have to accept the possible, though, unpleasant as it usually is. Why don't you go on down the

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stairway beyond the liturgical curtain there. You can't miss Cellar 6. They're all numbered."

In the stone corridors below the salesroom of the chateau, Jolson stopped. From around the first turning, voices sounded.

"The bouquet is fascinating, truly fascinating, my dear Brother William," said the voice of the real Dr. Seacroft.

"I should caution you, Dr. Seacroft," said a soft nasal voice, "we think of our Possibilitarian Brothers rosé as a fitting companion, when properly chilled, for certain types of shell fish. I wouldn't advice drinking it with a chocolate cupcake."

"Only wine snobs," said Seacroft with his mouth full, "need to be so rigid, Brother William."

Jolson noticed three tarnished metal hooks in the dark stone wall. On one of them was hanging a wine-spotted Possibilitarian robe. Jolson eased across the corridor and got into the robe.

Tottering into Cellar 6, he said, "Forgive me, I'm still a bit woozy." He was now a replica of Brother Sheldon.

"Join us," invited Dr. Seacroft. He had chocolate crumbs on his moustache and a bottle of pink wine in his right hand.

Standing around a large ice bucket were the two Lt. Colonels, the black girl and a Possibilitarian Brother. "I'm afraid I must refuse," said Jolson. "Though many things are possible, sampling is not at the moment one of them." He smiled at the nerve-gas girl, tripped and knocked over the ice bucket. He tried to catch his balance by grabbing Dr. Seacroft. The weaponry man toppled back into a rack of burgundy bottles, and Jolson elongated his fingers and shot them into Seacroft's coat pocket while his body masked the action from the others.

"Possibly," suggested Brother William, "you had best return upstairs, Brother Sheldon."

"Yes," said Jolson, stepping up clear of the fallen Dr. Seacroft. Jolson now had the two microcards of manuscript beneath his robe. He bowed, weaving slightly, and left the wine cellar.

The next day he was back in Keystone City. Himself again.

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Most of George Malko's writing has been for television documentaries and semi-documentary film featurettes. He tells us that this story was written originally as a one-act play for television. "I decided to see how it would work as a story, because its theatricality lay more in what was being implied rather than in straight action." Its implications are neither terribly far-fetched nor pleasant, and its impact is considerable.

THE FLOWER KID CASHES IN

by George Malko

FORTY-FOUR YEARS OLD AND tired, Madden would lie awake at night and stare at the stars through the gaping holes in the roof and wonder what had happened. In the morning, when the sun rose, he would turn over and close his eyes.

D came one afternoon and found him out. She sat down on the edge of what had once been the bandstand and began to fiddle with the tape player. She methodically inserted one cartridge after the other, ignoring the harsh discords that rumbled out of the tiny machine. The scrape of a board made her tense and momentarily coil into herself. She recognized Madden's wheeze and went back to sorting through the meager collection of cartridges, as if searching for the one among them that would not screech and whine at her.

Madden inched his way in through the collapsed boards next to the rotted slats of the go-go dancer's cage. He was carrying a large bag of groceries. He paused, his shaggy mop of receding hair wild and surprised around his gentle face and young and blue and incredibly kind eyes. They peered at D through the quaint pair of granny glasses perched on the tip of his nose. For a moment he couldn't remember who she was.

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The mottled and tattered tinsel over her head threw mixed flashes of light and dark that wanly brightened the drab tunic she was wearing. Bent over the tape player she seemed nothing more than a child lost in concentration. He remembered, smiled, and carried the groceries over to the bandstand. Once free of them, he slumped, as if feeling their now gone weight for the first time.

"They almost got me." As usual when he spoke, his hands began to flutter, making disembodied movements of their own.

D put on another cartridge. "They sound worse." Her voice was flat and not even remotely young.

"Someone saw me slipping past the Credo-Check-Line circuit and put the blast on his transmitter. Poor mother must've left his cannon at home." Madden sighed and looked around nervously. The only neat, surviving thing in the whole shambles was a small cafe table and one chair. On the table he had arranged a meager bunch of dying flowers in a chipped drinking glass.

"Can't you ever fix this?" D asked.

"If you can't get me a couple of old-fashioned mercury batteries, it'll just get weaker and weaker."

"They'll want to know why, and ask all kinds of questions. Can't you steal some?"

Madden laughed ruefully and sat down at the table. "The places I hit only carry food, thank God. They stopped selling batteries years ago. Just food, and maybe ammo."

"I have to go home soon."

"I just got back," Madden said and frowned. "Stay a little longer."

"We're going to The Arena tonight."

"Again?" His hands moved more quickly. "Who's there left to kill?"

D shrugged and put on another cartridge. "I like this one the best." It was the first time she had expressed any kind of an opinion, but Madden didn't notice. When he had first come upon her rummaging around the rubble-strewn field outside, he had thought, momentarily, she was like him. Then he had seen her uniform-like outfit and had become frightened. When she hadn't raised an alarm and seemed merely curious, he had relaxed. Finally, overcoming his sense of febrile caution, he had led her inside and shown her his hideout.

The songs struggled out of the tape player. Madden picked up one of the flowers and carefully ran a finger over its drooping petals. "Yeah," he said. "It's groovy." He sighed and looked up into a ray of slanting sunlight cutting through the moldering ceiling. "It was all groovy. We sure had something beautiful going for us."

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"Yes," D said and abruptly turned off the tape player.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to get hung up on it again."

"I don't mind." She slowly climbed up onto the bandstand. "But you always get upset when you talk about it."

"I just can't believe there's only me, you know?"

As he spoke, D picked up a length of wood. She put it across two uprights, slowly set herself, raised a knife-stiff hand, yelled "Hai!" and split the board with a perfectly executed karate chop.

Madden jumped and whirled, his face terror-stricken. "Christ, kid! Don't *do* that!"

D, completely calm, sat down again. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was just practicing."

Too nervous to sit, Madden went over and began unpacking the groceries. "Somebody'll hear you. That's all I need."

"I have to go."

Madden stopped and turned around. "Stick around. Please." A sudden noise outside made him stiffen, and then drop to the floor like a rock. "It's them!" he whispered hoarsely.

D, in a half crouch, raised her head and listened. "I don't think so."

"How do you know, for Christ's sake? Get down! They'll spot you."

D lowered herself, as the opening Madden had come through was forced aside and a tall, grotesque figure crawled in and slowly stood up. He was enormous, and was wearing a ten-gallon hat, fringed buckskin jacket, ragged Levis, and boots. Wide, long sideburns came down from under the hat. He had on a pair of bifocals with bottom lenses like the bottom of Coke bottles. "Madden," he rumbled in a voice rich with dignity. *"Kimosabe."*

"Outlaw!" Madden was on his feet.

"Hey, baby—" Outlaw began, and fell straight forward, a tomahawk buried between his shoulder blades.

Madden froze . . . There was music somewhere; thin, lost music full of lush chords and overtones of sadness; the sentry had stood his ground but the Indians had sneaked up and revenged themselves on the U.S. Cavalry . . . He broke and ran over to the fallen man and carefully turned him over. "Outlaw! What happened?"

Outlaw's eyes fluttered open. "I made it, man," he rasped. "Two thousand miles and I made it."

Madden couldn't believe it. "Two thousand—"

"Ol' Outlaw bought it good this time, podner." His breath rattled in his throat.

"Save your strength, Outlaw. Don't try to talk." He looked up at D. "Get me some water," he said urgently. "Quick."

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"No," Outlaw said. "Wait." He drew Madden closer. "Listen," he began with difficulty. "Listen . . ."

"Yes, Outlaw. Yes."

"The murderer is . . ." He coughed again, his chest contracting with pain. "The murderer is . . ." His eyes rolled up, a last whistling breath escaped his lips, and his head lolled to the side.

"Outlaw!"

There was no more music.

"Shall I get some water?" D asked.

After a moment Madden shook his head. "It's too late."

"Who's the murderer?"

Madden didn't seem to hear. He cradled Outlaw for a few moments and then gently released him and got up and went back to the little cafe table and sat down. "When we were kids," he began, his face an expression of soft grief, "we both grooved flicks. Two, three times a week, we'd split school and catch anything that was playing. On the way home we'd—" he stopped and took a deep breath. "One of us would do the whole picture. Our favorite was—" He couldn't go on and only gestured weakly at his dead friend.

"Was he an outlaw?" D asked.

"Of course not," Madden said quietly.

D went over and looked at the body and then back at Madden. "Well," she said unemotionally, "now you really are what you said."

"What are you talking about?" Madden said emptily.

"You're the last one. The very last one."

Madden glanced at Outlaw's body and then looked away. "You want to collect the bounty?"

D shook her head and then held up the tape player. "I wish this worked."

"You can have it."

"I won't turn you in."

"I want to give it to you," Madden insisted. "A present. Then, when you find a battery, nobody'll ask questions. You can say you found it."

"Oh."

After a short silence, Madden said, "I guess you have to go."

"Yes."

"Will you come see me tomorrow?"

D shook her head. "No."

"Why not?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"We can talk some more. I can tell you about—"

D interrupted. "You've told me everything."

"I haven't," Madden said and got to his feet. "I'm sure I—"

A shot ricocheted off the far wall, cutting him off. It hit with a high ping and shattered an already broken mirror. Madden dropped to the floor. Next to him, D was down, too, catlike.

"They found me," he whispered with terrified urgency. D's face showed nothing. "It's them."

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D glided over to the wall, flattened herself against it and expertly peered through a crack. "It's just some kids," she said and straightened up.

"Are you sure?" Madden was white as a sheet and was breathing with difficulty.

"Take a look for yourself."

Madden didn't. He got to his feet unsteadily and went over and sat down at the table, trembling from head to feet. When he spoke, it was as if he was already in the middle of a high, intense narrative. "I was about nineteen and I'd just come back from The Hash and was grooving it around the house. Everybody was real *busy* with something, and I just floated in and out like a sweet smell." He looked at D, who was watching him. "Did I tell you about my sister?" He didn't wait for her to answer, but resumed talking. D joined in, word-for-word, her tone remotely tired, yet faithful to his intensity. "I had this jar of acid in the icebox," they said in unison, "and nobody cared, so I tripped out my little sister. It saved her life. It really did."

D stopped, but Madden went on, his face becoming more and more animated. "She was insane. My mother knew it and when I tripped her it saved her. She was just a kid and grooving everything and balling like a rabbit and always happy and laughing! But *going*. She had this *thing* she was looking to dig and my mother—did I tell you my mother was an opera singer? She was. She was a very good opera singer and a wonderful, wonderful person. Nothing cut her the wrong way; it was each to his own thing, you know? That's how she was and we hit it off something much! I'd be flying and telling her about it and the kid'd drag in and dig us for a while and it was all so *solid*. The old man—" Madden was flushed now, his hands moving with a life of their own, "—he was somewhere else, scratching for his life in advertising and just being so *square*. But he loved what he was doing, you know? He LOVED it! The old lady was all over hell and gone singing on these big, big stages and dying all pretty like every night, all dainty delicate Japanese lady blossom, and audiences flipping out, the way she'd flutter a last note and then slowly fold over into herself and disappear . . . And my little sister was going tighter and tighter. I could *feel* it, when she'd come in, like I was one of those great big bows and somebody was fitting the arrow to me and starting to make me bend, and I'd want to scream! So . . . one day we both just dropped acid and I wished her good luck. We walked across the George Washington Bridge and everything suddenly slowed down, like waves that take forever to build and then take an eternity to crash. There was a

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purple light hanging over the city and the river was silver and shining and hard as a diamond. I knew what that river felt like and I looked at my sister and her face was happy and she was crying and she said she could taste the purple. Sea gulls were pinned in the sky and gliding in and out and moving their little heads back and forth. Their little pink eyes looked at us and we looked at them and I laughed and waved and my sister waved and then she said they wanted to talk to her and she climbed over the railing and stepped out to see what they wanted." He stopped and swallowed. His face was calm, his hands in the air, motionless. "I *heard* her hit the water."

In the silence that followed, D waited to make sure Madden had nothing more to say. Then she picked up the tape player and the cartridges.

Madden watched her and then took one of the flowers out of the glass. "Here," he said offering it to her. "Take one with you."

D stopped and turned. "Why?"

"To remember me," Madden said finally.

D held up the tape player. "I have this."

"What if you can't find a battery?"

"I'll throw it away," she said and left.

For some moments Madden sat quietly. Then he looked around. He got up and slowly resumed unpacking the groceries. He had put almost all of them away in the small cupboard he had fashioned under the bandstand when the sound of a board falling made him turn. He carefully closed the cupboard and heard a man's voice, casual and hard, say, "Looks like somebody's been in here."

Picking up the solitary flower, Madden quickly moved into a shadowed corner and pressed himself back as far as possible.

A door on the far side of the room was kicked open and fell off its hinges. Two men came in, both of them thick-necked, small-eyed, overweight, wearing drab, functional clothing. Each carried a large pistol. The fatter of the two spotted Outlaw's body and gave a low whistle. "Willya take a look at that," he drawled.

His buddy hitched up his belt and warily looked around. "Wonder who got him?"

Trembling, using whatever strength he had left, Madden took a deep breath and stepped out of the shadows, holding the flower out in front of him. "Hello," he said. His voice was warm and friendly.

The fat man turned and slowly raised his gun. "Well, I'll be dipped—"

Madden's hand was steady as he held out the flower. He heard the music again, sad, final, and he smiled. Lovingly. ◄

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